

## Future Feminist Archives Symposium

### The stories of Dubbo women told through the archives

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*Warning: I will be discussing and showing images of deceased people of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage.*

#### **Pearl Gibbs**

Pearl Gibbs died over 20 years ago, so I will never have the pleasure of meeting this amazing woman. To find out about her, and her fascinating life I am reliant on the words, documents, and memories that she has left behind, ephemera that can only provide a partial representation of her, but it is better than no representation at all. And it can so easily be lost. That is why archives are so important, from the big state institutions to the small local archives, such as the Local Studies Collection held here in Dubbo at Macquarie Regional Library.

Today I would like to take a detailed look at Pearl Gibbs story followed up with a short discussion some issues about how it, and women's stories in general, are represented in Macquarie Regional Libraries local studies collection. Finally I will briefly discuss two other stories relating to women in Dubbo's history, that highlight how we can use archive collections to illuminate the something of lives and experiences of women.

Pearl Gibbs was one of the most influential political activists of her era. Born in 1901 she entered into a world of government regulated reserves, where aboriginals were controlled by the state and their rights as individuals and a people wholly unrecognised. During her lifetime she would play an instrumental part in the rise of the Aboriginal rights movement, witness the dismantling of the NSW Aborigines Protection Board, and help aboriginal people to gain more rights and freedoms. She would continue to fight for aboriginal rights and against continued discrimination and disadvantage until the day she died.

Pearl grew up in a loving family, spending most of her childhood living on a pastoral station near Bourke where her mother worked as a cook, and her step father worked as a horse groom. Moving to Sydney to work as a domestic and cook at the age of 16, Pearl undertook her first foray into activism when she meet aboriginal girls who, taken from the families and trained at the Cootamundra Aborigines Girls home, were sent to work as domestics. Today we refer to these children as the Stolen Generation. Appalled by their situation she attempted to negotiate on their behalf with the Aborigines Protection Board. Her failure to assist these girls was the start of Pearl's long fight to gain better conditions for her people.

In the early 1930s as depression spread, Pearl along with many aboriginal domestic workers, was forced out of work. With few options, Pearl moved with her family to an Aboriginal Reserve, where she experienced firsthand the discrimination and oppression of Reserve life. Pearl continued to agitate (often successfully) for better working and living conditions for those living on Reserves.

One of her favourite stories of this period of her life was of a Reserve manager who insisted that women from the Reserve could only shop in his presence. This allowed him to control their money and pay for all their purchases. Pearl instigated a protest against this by encouraging women to purchase only underwear in his presence, he was quickly forced to relent.

These experiences increased Pearl's awareness of the inequalities faced by Aboriginals, and her desire to see a better and fairer situation for her people.

In 1937 she was one of the founding members of the Aboriginal Progressive Association (APA), its first meeting was held here in Dubbo. The Aboriginal Progressive Association was Pearl's introduction in large scale political activism, and where she began her career as a public speaker. In an era when it was rare for women to speak publically about political issues, Pearl was able to speak with passion and fluency about the appalling situation faced by her people.

In 1938 she was instrumental in organising the National Day of Mourning. It was held on the 26<sup>th</sup> of January 1938, the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the landing of the First Fleet. In direct contrast to the celebrations happening around Sydney the Protesters marched silently, dressed in mourning black, down Elizabeth Street to Australia Hall, where they held the first national conference for Aboriginal Australians.

Following the success of the protest, Pearl was chosen to be part of the first aboriginal delegation to meet with an Australian Prime Minister and discuss the issues faced by Aboriginal people. At the meeting she spoke eloquently famously stating, 'I am more proud of my Aboriginal Blood than my white blood'

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s Pearl continued to speak out about the conditions on aboriginal reserves, and was particularly concerned about the plight of aboriginal woman and children. A brilliant speaker and networker Pearl was able to engage people across a myriad of social, political and racial divides. She was able to garner support from union groups, feminist groups, and middle class women's groups, and various social and political clubs, to name a few. Groups who, while protesting injustices occurring in other parts of the world, had never before considered the situation of Aboriginal people in their own country, now listened with empathy as she spoke passionately about their situation.

In the early 1940s Pearl was given the opportunity to broadcast a speech over the Radio, the success of which lead to a scripted radio show. Pearl was the first aboriginal person to speak on Australian radio and the first present her own scripted show.

In the mid 1940s Pearl and her family settled permanently in Dubbo, and from this base she continued her political activism work. In 1954 Pearl was the only aboriginal women to be elected to the Aborigines Welfare Board. However she found her ability to make positive changes hampered by the organisational structure and culture of the Board, and resigned in 1957.

Instead she helped to establish two new organisations that would have long reaching consequences for aboriginal rights. The first, on a more personal level, was the establishment of a Hostel for Aboriginal people seeking treatment at Dubbo Base Hospital. Again showing her amazing networking skills she was able to gain the initial funding for the Hostel from the Sydney branch of the Waterside Workers Union. Pearl ran the Hostel for many years tirelessly supporting aboriginal people receiving hospital treatment.

The second organisation was Aboriginal Australian Fellowship (AAF) which she founded with Faith Bandler. The primary aim of the AAF was for aboriginal people to be accepted 'on the basis of complete social and political equality' As the Vice President for the AAF Pearl organised a rally of 500 aboriginal people at the Sydney Town Hall launching a national petition calling for changes to the Australian Constitution that would give Aboriginal people the same political rights as other Australians. This was the first step in a decade long campaign that culminated in the successful 1967 Referendum.

#### IMAGE 4 SHOW CLIP

Pearl would continue to write, speak out, organise and influence the Aboriginal rights movement for the rest of her life, passing away in Dubbo on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of April 1983.

Pearl Gibbs story is interesting and influential, and has a strong connection with Dubbo's past. Yet her story is not well represented in the Local Studies Collection at Macquarie Regional Library. The reason for this, I believe, goes back to origin and development of this collection. This archive was initially part of a small volunteer run organisation, as such the collection represents the interests of that group, namely the history of Dubbo, and its founding fathers. Women in general are sadly underrepresented in the collection as whole.

So while fat files have been compiled on our famous founding fathers, and early local historians have devoted much time writing of their achievements, the lives of their wives, and daughters are only mentioned in passing.

However, with time, patients and a little bit of luck, those stories can be brought to light. I would like to share briefly with you two stories that Simone came across through her work with the Local Studies Collection. Both stories illuminate something of the lives and roles that women played in the Dubbo community, and show that while women might walk softly through the pages of history, they were in fact active and engaged members of their communities.

#### **The Dubbo Bridge Controversy**

Dubbo in 1866 was a small but thriving village located on an important stock route and surrounded by excellent grazing land, the squatters of the 1840s were now the prominent members of the community. A newly built bridge over the Macquarie River offered an easy means of crossing that would only encourage travel and trade in Dubbo. Thus the naming of this new bridge was taken very seriously, so seriously in fact that a feud broke out in town over what it should be called. At a meeting held in May a group of ladies from the Dubbo area proposed to name the bridge 'Albert' in honour of Prince Albert. A Mrs Serisier and Miss Carroll were chosen to officiate the naming ceremony to be held at 12pm on the 24<sup>th</sup> May, the Queen's Birthday.

Not to be outdone, another group of concerned citizens led by Mr and Mrs Campbell, proposed to name the bridge 'Oxley' after the surveyor general who had originally surveyed the region in the 1840s. The Oxleyites, as they were derisively called in the papers of the day, decided to hold an opening ceremony at 11am on the 24<sup>th</sup> of May, one hour earlier than their competitors.

So on the 24<sup>th</sup> May two parties set out to officially name the bridge one after the other. Both would later claim that their chosen name had been sanctioned by the Government and was therefore the official 'name'. In actuality the white washed wooden truss bridge was known simply as the 'white bridge', and the feud over its name was soon forgotten.

What this incident shows is that the women of Dubbo were actively participating and influencing local decisions, and would stand up for what they believed was right. It is a glimmer into the lives of the women who were founders of Dubbo, and who in their own way, influenced the early life and development of Dubbo just as much as their husbands did.

### **Matron Mary Adams**

The story of Mary Josephine Adams, highlights how easily it is for a woman's tale to be forgotten and the reliance of archives on the support and trust of the public. Without families who are willing to donate documents, artworks, objects, and photos to museums and archives we would not be able to preserve these wonderful items for future generations. More importantly we would not be able to explore these wonderful stories.

The photographs and documents you see here are part of a donation recently received by Macquarie Regional Library from Mary Adams' family. They have trusted us not only to conserve these very personal items, but also use them to communicate something of her life, and her story.

Mary was a married woman who had trained as a nurse when she arrived in the area in 1893 to work as a Nurse and governess for the invalid wife of a grazier at Murrumbidgee. In 1895 she moved to Dubbo with her family. Although she was a married woman with children, she went against the convention of the times to establish her own business, Carlyle Private Hospital in the early 1900s.

Widowed in 1916, Matron Mary continued to work and manage Carlyle Private Hospital independently. Her daughter Nellie followed in her footsteps, training as a nurse and working with her Mother at Carlyle Hospital.

Mary Adams was regarded with respect in Dubbo, there are many notes of thanks in the local paper from families who used her hospital services. She also participated in many other community organisations such as the Ambulance Axillary. In an era when the role of a married woman was strictly prescribed by social mores, Matron Mary Adams owned and managed a successful business for over 50 years, providing the women of her community with a vital service.

## **Conclusion**

Like many women Mary Adams, was not trying to do anything extraordinary, she was just trying to live her life and support her family. There are no articles or books written about her, even her beloved hospital is no longer in existence, torn down in the 1960s. But we can remember her, and the remarkable life she lead, as we do Pearl Gibbs, and the early women of Dubbo, through the records, and photographs and memories that have been saved and stored anonymously on the shelves of archives big and small across Australia, it just a matter of taking the time to look.