

Betty Fulmer (nee Strange-Mure) Remembers

Judith Lewis

Betty Fulmer (Strange-Mure) lives in Blayney. I recently sent her a copy of the 2010 Bicentenary Programme. She replied, "My life in Riverstone holds many happy memories for me," and concluded her letter with "...it was special of you to bring back so many memories to an 85 year old youngster." With her permission I will share some of those memories.

Betty was the eldest daughter of Charles and Gladys Strange-Mure. Her sisters are Dorothy, who lived all her married life, as Dorothy Cassell, in Riverstone and who now, sadly has Alzheimer's Disease, and lives in a home at Kurrajong. Her youngest sister is Noela* who became a renowned opera singer. Noela's musical career began in the late 1940s and has continued into the 21st century.

The Strange-Mure family moved from Randwick to Riverstone where Charles, in 1930, built their Piccadilly Street home facing Park Street (the home still stands). Betty describes her home as "beautiful". The home was on a large block surrounded by paddocks and bushland. Closest neighbours were the Pearces, Draytons and Schofields in Piccadilly Street and Davis's in Park Street. Charles built a tennis court behind the house and, during the war years, an air raid shelter behind the tennis court. Gladys was a music teacher, both an excellent pianist and with a beautiful singing voice. She encouraged her daughters to learn singing and music and all three had beautiful singing voices.



The Strange-Mure home as it stood in 1993.

Photo: Rosemary Phillis

Betty left school at age 14 and her first position was as a telephonist at the Riverstone Telephone Exchange* at the Post Office, then located at the Railway Station. After 71 years she says, "I can still hear myself saying, 'Number, please?'" when putting the plug in the switchboard." When, after a few years, Betty was transferred to the Windsor Post Office Exchange, her parents did not want her to travel by train to Windsor, so she found work at the Riverstone Meatworks packing sausages, to be sent to the Middle East for the Army during the Second World War.

Betty tells, " We used to write our names under the label on the cans of sausages. Would you believe, I remember a soldier from Queensland, serving in the Middle East, finding my name under the label.

We wrote to each other for months. He came down to see me in person. I had chicken pox and my face was covered in sores at the time. I must have scared him and we never wrote again!”

In 1944 Betty joined the Australian Women’s Land Army, AWLA. She recalls her Land Army days as happy ones despite the sadness associated with the War. Her parents would not allow her to join the Services until she turned 18. So on Sunday 12th February 1944 Betty said a sad “goodbye”, at Central Station Sydney, to her parents, Charles and Gladys, and her sisters. They were all in tears, as none of the girls had been away from home before. The steam train departed Central Station at 10pm and arrived at “the beautiful little country village of Batlow” at lunchtime the following day. Betty was amazed at the beauty of the Gilmore Valley and she felt the sadness leave her.

Betty recalls hearing the Stationmaster at Batlow announce, “All out here!” and the next minute hearing a voice exclaim “Don’t touch my things! I’m not staying here in this damn place!” The Stationmaster’s reply was, “That’s all right. The train doesn’t return to Sydney until Wednesday.” Betty comment was “Goodness knows what happened to her!”

At Batlow Betty and about ten other girls were taken up to the old Scouts’ Hall for lunch. Later they were taken to a two storey building to join other Land Army girls who were already working out on the farms. Betty’s first Land Army job was working in a sawmill, about five miles away. Each day the girls travelled to work on a truck, all singing as they went. Betty’s task was taking and stacking the timber from the saw after it had been cut. This job lasted for three months during which time she made lots of friends.

Her next job was picking apples and pears, climbing up ladders to reach the tops of the fruit trees. She recalls, “We would be singing the old songs and loving every minute of it.” After several weeks, when the fruit was all picked and had been sent to the packinghouse, it was time for the spraying of the fruit trees to be done. This was done riding around in a horse and cart. The girls needed to be well covered for protection from the spray. The Land Army girls also painted some of the buildings.

When their work was finished at Batlow the girls were sent on to Kingsvale, near Young, to pick cherries. From Kingsvale they moved on to Griffith to the vegetable fields where they were often trapped in the windstorms from the red soil plains. The weather there was so hot and windy that they could hardly breathe. This was especially so when they were ploughing the land to plant carrots.

There were five of the girls who stayed together for most of the time they were in the Land Army and, after 66 years, they still keep in touch by letter. They were discharged from the Australian Women’s Land Army in 1945. Betty is not exaggerating when she concludes with “...those memories will stay with me forever”.

Footnote: The Australian Women’s Land Army, AWLA, was established in July 1942 in response to labour shortages in country areas. The AWLA recruited women to work on farms where there were no men left to do the hard labour that was traditionally assigned to men. AWLA was not considered a military service and never included benefits such as the pensions, deferred pay and bonuses, which were available to those women who joined WRANS, AWAS and others.

By 1944 the AWLA had around 3,000 members.

*References:-

page 31 Journal 2004 – “Noela Strange- Mure” by Clarrie Neal

page 11 Journal 2009 – “Riverstone Post Office and the Telephone Exchange” by Judith Lewis