

## MARY WHITEHEAD

1917 - 2014

Mary Whitehead was born at Chiltern, Victoria on 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1917 – the second daughter to her parents who were both from pioneering families. They owned a property in the north east of Victoria – a district known for gold mines, vineyards and the Kelly Gang. The house that was their home is now the oldest house still standing in northeast Victoria.

Education: Correspondence school (fortunately her mother had been a school teacher) and State school in the nearest town about 7 kilometres away (she and her sister rode to school on horseback), then boarding school in Melbourne (Ruyton) (there was no secondary education available near her home), and Janet Clarke Hall at the University of Melbourne; her subjects were Mathematics, Theory of Statistics, Economics and French. (all this was quite an effort for a family during the Great Depression of the Thirties)

She had hoped to obtain work in the actuarial field, but was told that “while you have the right qualifications, that work is far too highly paid for a woman!”. Teaching did not appeal and she was fortunate to obtain a temporary position as an assistant librarian at the Bureau of Census and Statistics in Canberra.

Canberra at that time had a population of approximately 15,000 people – a small town where everyone knew everyone else – most were Commonwealth Public Servant families. The single women were housed in hostels, some of them for women only.

There were no formal courses for librarians in those days; but the staff of the Parliamentary Library gave lectures to the librarians in the two or three Departments where there designated librarians. These lectures and work experience were the only training available, but it was enough to get her first promotion to the position of librarian of the Commonwealth Patent Office in March 1938. Mary worked there until October 1941, when she joined the Australian Army Medical Women’s Service in the AIF. Many of these women worked as assistants to the nurses in the wards, but Mary always did clerical and secretarial work. Although she was on drafts to go overseas on several occasions, she never left Australia during the War. When her father died in 1942 she had to have extended leave so that she could go home to keep the property going until her sister and brother in law were able to take charge.

Mary returned to Canberra in 1946, but shortly afterwards had the opportunity to do training in Statistical Theory and Practice with Dr Cornish, the head of CSIR (now CSIRO) Division of Statistics in Adelaide; a year later she went to Melbourne to do statistical analysis for the Personnel Practice Branch of the Department of Labour and National Service.

In 1949 she returned to Adelaide to work for the Long Range Weapons Establishment to work on the bomb and missile trials at Woomera, and, apart for a working holiday in England in 1955-56, remained there until she retired.

The mathematical work for trials covered a wide range – astronomy (the star positions were used to calibrate large aperture cameras), liaison with the armed services, with surveyors (to obtain precise positions of all instruments on the Range), and with meteorologists (to obtain data for the refraction of the air at the time of trials) and many others with specialist skills. Her task was to help devise the mathematical formulae to calculate the precise position of a missile or aircraft any time of its trajectory.

Her experience of the work ranged from the earliest days of the desktop equipment, to operating the first electronic computer in Australia (WREDAC), preparing data for the mainframe computers and a certain amount of programming for WREDAC and its successor, an IBM computer.

Many of the next generation of computers were installed around Australia, and in many cases were operated by men who had had experience at Salisbury., it was widely believed that not all the work was strictly Defense work. One such project was the modification of the sails of the Sydney Opera House. On another occasion, Mary had a phone call from a top-racing reporter asking if it were true that the computer could pick the winner of the Melbourne Cup.

With the end of the missile trials she was transferred to the library to do searches on the United States databases, which were a forerunner of the present day Internet.

During her working life Mary was a member of the Commonwealth Professional Officers Association, and was the first woman to be a state president. She was also on the council of the Weapons Research Establishment Association (a social and sporting body of people who worked in WRE), and was the first woman to be its president.

Working in a predominantly male environment Mary became mindful of the status of women in employment. Nevertheless this did not deter Mary from appointments to a number of senior positions that achieved some “firsts for women”.

Mary will be long remembered by her Soroptimist sisters across the globe, for her role at Federation level and especially those in SI Torrens Inc. where she was a devoted member for 57 years; the Region of South Australia, the Federation of the SISWP and beyond

Deservingly Mary was awarded the Member of the Order of Australia on 11 June, 1984 for service to the community, particularly women’s affairs.

Mary was a gentle and visionary lady