

Mandurama mothers

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This picture, taken in the early twentieth century, captures a group of mums taking their offspring out for a walk in the town of Mandurama, central western New South Wales (see photo amongst articles online). The photographer was either Evan Antoni Johann Lumme or his wife Alice Rosina Lumme, better known as Rose. Lumme was Estonian born, he arrived in Australia in 1889 and became an independent commercial photographer in the town of Mandurama. A selection of Lumme's photos were published in *Faces of Mandurama* by the National Library of Australia.

This snap evoked for me many questions such as: what was it like to be a mother in the early days of Australia's nationhood? In what conditions did women manage their homes and their families? How many children did they have? And how many mothers and babies were surviving the birth process? Here below are some of my findings.

In the mid-1800s men outnumbered the women by 3 to 1 and successive Colonial Governors had officially promoted marriage as a means of civilizing an unruly male population. The difference had evened out by 1911 through an increasing number of native born, and through immigration. Out of a total adult female population of 1.2 million, one third were married, one tenth were widowed, (a small number of 2,140 were divorced) and one quarter of the adult female population were officially unattached.

Life expectancy in Australia between 1901 and 1910 for women was 59 years and men 55. In the 1870s childbirth was the third greatest cause of death for women of childbearing age but by 1911 there had been a substantial decrease; of 118,369 births recorded there were 6,119 maternal deaths (approximately 1 in 20). Furthermore the loss of infants under 1 year came down from a peak of 139 per 1000 in 1875 to 69 per 1000 in 1911. Doctors attending births generally brought experience with them but little training. Most women were assisted by competent midwives and isolated women gave birth either by themselves or with their husband's help. The majority of families had 2 or 3 children with fewer proportions having 4 to 13 children and fewer still being recorded as having 16 to 22 offspring and surprisingly 18% of wives had no children. The NSW government held a Royal Commission into the declining birthrate in 1904. The all male members blamed women's selfishness, love and luxury and social pressures for the low fertility rate. (They may well have hit the nail on the head there, and not a bad thing I might add.) In 1912 a maternity allowance was adopted by

the federal government which was dubbed a 'baby bonus'; an amount of £5 was available either in the 'prematernity' period or after.

In 1877 several people were tried in Britain for producing pamphlets on contraception and in 1888 a similar case faced prosecution in Australia. The main forms of birth control at the turn of the century were withdrawal, abstinence and douching methods practiced by something like 25% of couples; with only 5% using contraceptives. Abortions were practiced though dangerous and infanticide (which had been an age old practice) occurred more often than we would like to think today; though difficult to put a figure on.

Many illegitimate babies, particularly the unwanted offspring of domestic servants, were taken to baby farms. This also was a practice though-out the world whereby large numbers of unwanted or abandoned babies were left with carers. Though most would eventually die, this became a means of stemming the practice of infanticide. Even though this was a time when motherhood was glorified nothing was done by governments to assist women left with children. They were dependent on their husbands to an extent that we would cringe at today.

In 1894 the colonial government in South Australia was the first to give women the vote, followed by Western Australia and then in 1902 legislation passed for women to vote federally which came to fruition in the 1903 election. Divorce was impossible up to the 1850s but afterwards difficult for women. A man could file for divorce based on adultery but women couldn't on adultery alone, incest, sodomy, bigamy, rape, desertion or cruelty had to be proven and furthermore, divorce was expensive and socially shunned. In the case of divorce the man gained custody of the children and sole right to property. Thankfully, a Married Women's Property Act, was passed in the late 19th century whereby women rights were considerably improved.

In 1911 20% of women were classified breadwinners and of these 7% were domestics, 5% of women worked in the transport and communication fields, and 2.5% were professionals. Twenty-five percent of male breadwinners were primary producers, 20% industrial workers, 10% commercial and 4% professional. In 1907 the Harvester Decision had been passed declaring a 'family wage' which provided men with an allotted increase for a dependent wife and three children. This family wage was available to all men regardless of family obligations and to no woman regardless of hers; thus, female teachers only received one half the wage of their male counterpart.

The bulk of the population lived in the non-metropolitan areas in 1911. A total of 1,700,000 lived in metropolitan areas (city and suburbs) whereas 2,800,000 lived in the rest of the country. The area that took in the town of Mandurama (Forbes and Bathurst/Orange) had a population of 36,000. The bulk of the population, 55%, lived in wooden dwellings followed by 26% in brick, 8% in stone, 5% in calico and 4% in iron structures. The average number of occupants in a dwelling was 4 to 5 with roughly one half of the population renting their homes.

In 1911 many country areas didn't have electricity, telephone services or refrigeration. Medical and dental services were rare and there were great problems with flies and mosquitoes with few sprays available. Housework was strenuous with all the cooking being done on a fuel (wood) stove or open fire. The basic diet was tea, damper and meat which was expanded, and supplemented by flour, sugar, dried fruit, potatoes, oil, eggs, butter, boiled puddings, fruit cakes and biscuits when the ingredients were available. A lot of the cooking was done in a Dutch Oven, a large iron pot with a lid and on legs, which was set into a bed of coals with more piled round and over it.

Water was obtained from creeks, rivers or lakes and in towns it was delivered to households though there were problems with purity. Meat was kept in a safe which hung outside, water seeped down from the top through the Hessian sides and the breeze kept meat coolish but didn't last more than a few days. When an animal was killed some of the meat was eaten fresh and the rest salted by the housewife. The fat was used for soap, candles or cream for face and hands, eaten as dripping on bread or used as suet instead of butter in cooking.

In country areas women's work generally included tending fruit trees, growing vegetables, keeping hens and often a cow. The cows had to be milked twice a day and milk put aside for the cream to make butter. Yeast was made from potatoes or hops and surplus fruit and vegetables made into jam or pickles. The housework was endless: dusting, sweeping, scrubbing floors, cleaning, washing dishes and the equipment: a duster, mop, broom and bucket. The washing was a days work: heating the water, scrubbing the clothes, rinsing, wringing and drying then starching and ironing with a heavy flat iron. The irons cooled quickly and had to be changed regularly; ironing was a real chore.

Clothes were often made by hand. Treadle machines had appeared in the 1860s but were expensive. Emigrants were advised to bring: dresses, cotton and flannel petticoats, chemises, corsets, stockings, nightgowns and caps, pocket handkerchiefs, neck handkerchiefs, bonnets, cloak and shawl, boots and shoes. Crinoline dresses

could use up to 20 yards of material. Most probably many clothes were handed down through the family.

Women often looked after the health of the family with soothing chamomile tea, home made poultices and castor oil. The availability of education brought forth an eventual revolution for women. In the 1870s primary education had become compulsory for boys and girls. Secondary education increased markedly and by 1881 women were permitted to attend the three universities; Melbourne, Sydney and Adelaide. Most women who entered further education studied the arts or science (general degrees) and the majority of these became teachers. In the 1880s some teachers colleges were opened. The few women who became doctors had studied medicine overseas and the number studying law was even less.

Nursing became more respected and recognised due to the influence of Florence Nightingale and her emphasis on training and hygiene. Lucy Osburn and a team of five came from England to train nurses here. They were horrified by the conditions in Sydney Hospital, it was dirty, smelly, badly drained and riddled with vermin and rats, with no running water.

The first woman appointed to the public service was Dora Coghlan at the turn of the century and the first librarian was Dorothy Izett. Dorothy began by sub-editing a journal on Anthropology and Children's health and eventually published five books. Amongst the poetry of Dorothea Mackellar is the Australian classic *My Country* and Ethel Turner wrote *Seven Little Australians*; furthermore Nellie Melba became a world famous singer.

By the turn of the century women were indeed socially active. The birth rate was declining and many societies and clubs sprang forth. The activist groups such as the Women's Christian Temperance Union and the Suffragettes only attracted a small numbers but the Church of England's, Mother's Union, had thousands of members throughout Australia.

There was a Children's Playgroup Association, the Bush Children's Health Scheme and a Bush Club for isolated women. There were literary and musical clubs, intellectual and social clubs, societies for those interested in science, photography, foreign languages or philosophy. Women also joined sporting groups: tennis, cricket, hockey, basketball and rowing. They played golf, croquet, ping-pong, lawn bowls and rifle shooting. Men and women bathed separately at this time but Fanny Durack and Mina Wylie, the first and second medallists in the 1912 Olympic Games, often broke the protocol. Fanny Durack went on to break twelve world records in swimming. Bicycle

and horse riding became popular and women began to ride 'astride'. The first accounts of women wearing trousers also appeared at the turn of the century.

So, life for these women bringing up a family (if they had no home help) meant lots of housework, cooking, washing, some farm duties and of-course looking after the children. Furthermore, one of these women could have worked as a domestic. They had probably attained some schooling. They had the vote and one of them could have been a member of the Mother's Union. Women in Australia had gone through a renaissance period whereby they were controlling the number of children they had and were becoming much more socially active. Their living conditions depended far too much on the nature and generosity of their husbands but if they were lucky with hard work, enthusiasm, some education, and an ability to reach out they could become a part of a vibrant female community.