

Tea, Tennis and Mrs Tillyard

The first Friends Canberra Series Lecture for 2009 featured a delightful presentation by Susan Mary Withycombe on the way in which the Canberra community welcomed women who made their home in Canberra in the 1920s and 1930s. The lecture, presented on 25 February, captivated those present and we thought that those of you who could not be present would appreciate at least a summary of this interesting story. The text below is a much abridged version of the lecture.

Many early women arrivals to Canberra were wives and daughters of men who came to work in a capital city under construction. Some were enthusiastic pioneers, seizing the opportunity to make a new life in a modern house in a Garden City. Others were reluctant conscripts, regretting what they had left behind, dismayed at what they found.

The Federal Capital Commission had done much to establish community services and facilities for recreation, but the work of individual women personally welcoming and befriending newcomers was invaluable. To a lonely woman, stuck in a beautiful house in a scattered suburb of strangers, an invitation to a social gathering might make all the difference between a sense of exile or one of belonging. Because they were not personally engaged in the 'men's business' of constructing the national capital or governing the nation, women were often the ones to foster personal relationships, care for newcomers, and create social groups.

Canberra was planned to be a 'City Beautiful' of splendid buildings in a picturesque landscape. However, long delays in building meant that the reality was too often the dirt and noise of construction sites alternating with the forlorn and weedy desolation of vacant allotments. The visual apartness both expressed and caused social isolation.



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The suburb of Barton, Canberra, c1930

Women nevertheless had to make this unpromising place a home. Many saw this as an opportunity to make their own life without parental interference. To live in a new house, with all new furnishings and fittings, in a new city, was an opportunity which came seldom. These women were free to be modern – if they wished – in a modern city.

They came to a place with a climate, physical situation, population and housing that was unique. Much of what they had left behind in their metropolis they had

either to provide for themselves or do without. Most residents grew their own vegetables and made their own fun. They transformed houses into homes, suburbs into communities, and wove delicate webs of personal relationships.

While the population remained small, it was possible for most people to have some kind of relationship with nearly everybody else. But while people may have known everyone in their own neighbourhood or workplace, or their grade of the Public Service and above, there were gaps in their knowledge of fellow Canberrans. Construction workers and their families were as much a part of Canberra as the families of public servants who overlooked or ignored them. Many remember Canberra as a very class-conscious place.

The local churches took a lead in welcoming the newcomers. Church members had to find money for their own buildings as well as for other essentials, including stipends for their clergy. Working for a common purpose promoted friendship and enabled people of limited financial means to make substantial contributions of their time and talent.

The women of St John's Church of England demonstrated their fund-raising abilities early when they catered for a Sports Day in 1915 to raise building funds. Due to the War, however, the next sports day was not held until 1920. The Roman Catholic women raised funds by organising bazaars and sales of work, concerts and card-parties, sports days and dances, as well as going about their neighbourhoods collecting donations in cash and in kind. The parish clergy encouraged them to seek out newcomers and welcome them into the fold. Most popular of fund-raising social events were adult and 'juvenile' balls for children.

Another popular way of meeting and interacting was through playing social games such as tennis. Most of the rural properties around Canberra had tennis courts and when the first planners and administrators arrived they built more, and when house-building gathered pace in the mid-1920s, so did making tennis courts. The number of public sporting amenities and recreation reserves in the working class residential areas of Canberra was remarkable. Some of these were built by the residents, others with government help.



Tennis in the wide open spaces of Canberra, c1935

A pattern of community welfare and progress associations had already been established in various residential areas and social games featured strongly amongst their activities. Westridge, for example, established an association at a meeting of residents held in the mess-room of Mrs Alice May Townsend (Mess Caterer for the Brickworks Camp) in 1922.

The uprooted newcomers still needed encouragement to meet their new neighbours and put down roots in their new environment. Much encouragement was given by other women. Lady Groom, whose husband was Speaker of the House of Representatives, formed a croquet club in 1928 to play on the croquet lawn at the Hotel Canberra.

Hilda Garran, wife of the Head of the Public Service, was outstanding. Pattie Tillyard came to Canberra with her husband and their four daughters in 1928. On their very first day, a little figure in black greeted the teenage girl at the door with 'Are you a Tillyard?' When the girl answered 'Yes' she said, 'Well, here's a bag of beans. Give them to your mother and tell her that Lady Garran called'. Three days later, Lady Garran invited Mrs Tillyard to afternoon tea to meet all her neighbours. Inspired by continuing demonstrations of Lady Garran's kindness, Mrs Tillyard worked for the rest of her long life to alleviate the acute loneliness and isolation felt by new arrivals.



***Sir Robert Garran and Lady Garran with Sir Littleton Groom
and Lady Groom, Telopea Park, 1926***

(photo: National Archives of Australia)

Some women were more enthusiastic about indoor games. Dell Calthorpe, for example, enjoyed playing tennis and golf, but really excelled at bridge. After mornings of home management, she spent many afternoons playing with friends, either in her own living room or in another woman's.