

Not "exceptional circumstances": Women in Bendigo and district 1925-1935**

My talk, which is based on chapter 4 of my PhD thesis, will focus on the three types of local Bendigo and district women who were not economically provided for by a male breadwinner, as was the accepted situation in 1920s and 1930s Australia. These women-widowed, deserted, or single- were numerically not the "exceptional circumstances" referred to by Justice Higgins in one of his 1912 Arbitration Court judgements.

WIDOWED

These women were the product of the ailment miners' phthisis which took the lives of so many local men employed in our quartz mines. This lengthy illness, and the premature deaths of their husbands, left these widows and children in often quite destitute economic circumstances. This social impact of an occupational health issue has rarely been analysed in other local studies, yet Bendigo had the unenviable distinction of recording the highest rate of Tuberculosis for every annual period from 1891-1932.

The number of widows who went to the Bendigo Benevolent Asylum for ODR (outdoor relief- usually food handouts) can be seen in Table 4.2. Often, their destitution was ongoing for the duration of the husband's illness. Charlotte Richardson of Hargreaves Street was the 37 year old mother of three young children when she went to the Asylum in March 1927. Her husband had died the month before. She said he had "suffered from Miners complaint for some years which had rendered her quite destitute." She was granted 10s. a week ODR from D. Whyte and Co.'s grocery store.

Work available to local widows was often in the poorly-paid area of domestic service, which involved cleaning, laundry, sewing or charwork (as it was then known) either in other women's homes, or for local businesses. Table 2.1 shows you the local breakdown of women employed as domestics in 1933. What happened if you had no extended family or friends to help mind your children so you could work? The only reliable form of assistance locally was the Asylum's ODR. (While NSW widows were granted their own state-funded pension in 1926, Victorian widows did not receive this aid until 1937.)

DESERTED

Other studies identified trends regarding the history of desertion in Australia; local deserted women's situations generally conformed to these wider trends. The legal procedures for getting overdue maintenance paid to them, or seeing their ex-husband serve a jail sentence, were costly and rarely successful. Desertion often occurred during pregnancy or before the last child was twelve months old. Young Bertha Mason's case highlighted these realities. Deserted in March 1925, this twenty-six year old mother of four had been breastfeeding the baby, but received 1½ pints of milk per day instead from the Asylum when she was unable to feed any longer; this inability to lactate was probably due to the combination of stresses in her personal life. The Asylum gave her regular ODR food, and boots for the other children. In June 1925, she disappeared from the records, but the indications were that this family's future existence would be precarious at best.

While Table 4.2 gives some idea of the numbers of local deserted women seeking aid from the Asylum, I believe the actual figures were much higher once the Depression officially commenced late in 1929. Husbands were often referred to as having gone "in the country" in search of work. Wives admitted they had not heard from their partners for time periods ranging from weeks to months. How long must a husband be absent before a woman knows she has been deserted? (This desertion rate might also explain why so many more women than men applied to the Asylum for ODR. See Table 3.4.)

As with their widowed sisters, respectable work was limited to domestic service, unskilled industries or clerical duties. Table 4.4 shows that as the Depression worsened, work for local females in selected industries decreased markedly. This reality is confirmed by the fact that at the time of the 1933 Census, the incomes of Bendigo and district females was very low; they ranged from 14.27 percent of Strathfieldsaye Shire women through to 22.89 percent of Eaglehawk women earning less than £52 for the 1932-33 financial year.

One form of financial assistance for deserted (and widowed) women with children was known as "boarding out". This money was administered by the Victorian Children's Welfare Department, and was given to mothers to assist them to support their own children. But this Department's own annual reports showed that guidelines had to be met before any deserted mother could receive aid from them. Legal proceedings had to be instigated "to compel the father to support the child." It cost 6s. for a summons to be served on the husband; then, as now, deserting husbands were not renowned for leaving a forwarding address!

According to local woman Johanna Leech, in 1930 she received £6 every three months for her three children, which calculates to 10s. per week in total; in some local suburbs this would have paid their weekly rent. (The large numbers of local children who belonged to ODR families can be seen in Table 4.3.)

SINGLE

There were numerous types of work opportunities for single girls in Bendigo and district, but there were few large-scale establishments as Table 4.4 highlights. (Unfortunately, the source of these statistics did not differentiate between single and married female workers.) The Hanro "knitting, hosiery" factory was a large employer prior to the effects of the Depression being felt. The "Underclothes" factory referred to would have been the one known colloquially as Whiteworks. Oral evidence suggests that younger single girls like my interviewees Lillian and Nancy, their siblings, and other single girls they knew, all worked at Whiteworks in the 1930s. The smaller "Clothing" and "Dresses" establishments probably included those sections of the larger local Myer and Beehive stores.

As we saw earlier in Table 2.1, domestic work absorbed many local females. My interviewee, Amy, found various domestic jobs in White-Hills homes from 1934 onwards. Other forms of domestic service were waitressing and housekeeping duties in local hotels, boarding houses and cafes. Lillian's older sister worked as a waitress in Miss Nankervis hotel and café. Favaloro Bros., the local caterers, had a string of cafes by the 1930s. They employed many local single girls in the various facets of their business. From the 1920s, local girls with skills were also employed in clerical positions in financial institutions and offices.

Single, unemployed, local women were in serious trouble because the Victorian Sustenance laws ruled that these women were ineligible for sustenance relief. No local sewing centre was established like those in Ballarat and Geelong. Without financial assistance from their father or another male relative, life for these women, regardless of their age, was very difficult.

CONCLUSION

Local widows, deserted wives, their children, and single women struggled to survive in local communities before and during the Great Depression. The previously unused records of the Bendigo Benevolent Asylum enabled the reality of these women's lives, and their personal stories, to be told.

***'Survivors, Schemes, Samaritans and Shareholders: the impact of the Great Depression on Bendigo and district 1925-1935' will be available soon in the Bendigo branch of the North Central Goldfields Regional Library.*

Table 2.1: Female "Personal/domestic service" occupation, Bendigo and district, 1933 Census.

	a. Personal/domestics	b. Total Females	a. as % of b.
Bendigo	906	3,826	23.7 %
Eaglehawk	84	637	13.2 %
Huntly	78	265	29.4 %
Marong	85	384	22.1 %
Strathfieldsaye	52	298	17.4 %

Table 3.4: Breakdown of Male and Female applicants for ODR, 1925-1929.

Year	Total new ODR	Males	Females
1925	34	9 26.5 %	25 73.5 %
1926	36	3 8.3 %	33 91.7 %
1927	47	13 28.3 %	34 71.7 %
1928	102	37 35.9 %	65 64.1 %
1929	132	43 32.6 %	89 67.4 %
TOTAL	351	105	246

Not “exceptional circumstances”: Women in Bendigo and district 1925-1935, Michele Matthews, *Survivors, Schemes, Samaritans and Shareholders: the impact of the Great Depression on Bendigo and district 1925-1935*, PhD, 2007.

Table 4.2: New Bendigo Asylum ODR families led by Widows or deserted Wives, 1925-1929.¹

	Widows	Deserted	Total new ODR Cases.
1925	5 (14.7 %)	3 (8.8 %)	34
1926	10 (27.8 %)	1 (2.8 %)	36
1927	10 (21.3 %)	3 (6.4 %)	47
1928	8 (7.8 %)	3 (2.9 %)	102
1929	10 (7.6 %)	9 (6.8 %)	132
TOT.	43 (12.25 %)	19 (5.4 %)	351

Table 4.3: Children in new ODR families, 1925-1929.²

Year	Total no. of children	Total new ODR Families
1925	73	34
1926	76	36
1927	107	47
1928	233	102
1929	342	132
TOTALS	831	351

Table 4.4: Female Employment in selected Bendigo industries, 1929-1935.³

Factory type	1929	1931	1932	1935
Clothing-	86	59	55	77
Dresses etc-	56	47	48	134
Knitting etc	232	134	160	199
Preserving	16	14	15	2
Underclothes	157	115	119	n/a*
Woollen mills	21	?	24	0
TOTAL FEMALES	614	423	448	457

¹ *Asylum Weekly Meetings, 1925-1929.*

² *Asylum Weekly Meetings, 1925-1929.*

³ Chief Inspector of Factories...1929, **VPP**, vol. 1, 1930, pp. 22-27; Chief Inspector of Factories...1931, **VPP**, vol. 1, 1932, pp. 20-25; Chief Inspector of Factories...1932, **VPP**, vol. 2, 1933, pp. 17-23; Chief Inspector of Factories...1935, **VPP**, vol. 1, 1936, pp. 17-22. *The category underclothing did not appear in the 1935 Report.