

## BEGINNINGS ENDINGS AND NEW BEGINNINGS

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Colleen O'Sullivan  
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The Country Women's Association Kandos branch came close to folding last year, with the executive committee in Sydney contemplating sale of the town's CWA building. Kandos women rallied, in particular the Women's Hub, and seven women signed up for membership at the May meeting. This year, in November, the branch will celebrate its 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

The CWA has a paradoxical image – the little woman in apron and hat serving tea and scones at the local show versus the resilient country woman, facing and overcoming adversity, within a network of supportive companions.

There has been an element of derision, I think, enfolding the CWA during its history, arising perhaps because in an age of male entitlement women found the capacity to fix their own problems. They were the early feminists establishing a bond of sisterhood.

It was at the Bushwomen's Conference held at the time of the Royal Easter Show in 1922 that the CWA was founded. Women at that conference identified the issues that concerned them most: health, isolation, education and community services. From these they named some immediate objectives: reduced train fares from country to coast; seaside accommodation; maternity wards in country hospitals.

A central executive was formed whose members went back to the country and opened branches. Crookwell was the first and Mudgee the third. By 1926 there were 6000 members and 109 branches, including Rylstone. According to the CWA website there are now 10,000 members in 400 branches. Not surprisingly it is the largest women's organisation in Australia.

The Kandos branch was opened in 1945. On Saturday 1 November Mrs Thomas Lloyd convened a meeting in the Comforts Fund Room. The branch was launched by Mrs Cullen, President of the Mudgee-Coolah Group (now the Castlereagh Country Group) and office bearers were elected: T Lloyd president; Simpkins, Kirkness, C Lloyd and Peerman vice-presidents; Wood secretary; Fuller treasurer; Peerman publicity officer. Additional foundation members were: Cant, Saville, Waters, Brown, Glover, Sneddon, Jeffrey, Williams, Cooper, Cook, Fergusan, Wade, Davis, Johnson and Arnhiem. Rule books sold for threepence.

They held their first ordinary meeting two weeks later. As I read through their monthly reports sent to the *Mudgee Guardian* all those years ago, I am full of admiration for their energy, sociability and generosity. The focus of their fund-raising, targeted at that meeting, was a gas anaesthetic machine for the obstetric ward at Rylstone Hospital. Their first event a dance at Truswell's Hall on January 25, with £20 to go to the machine. Though tickets were only three shillings per couple, they raised, with donations, £29/16/6. Members did the catering, a bus ran from Mudgee, Ray Pennell's orchestra was engaged and novelty dances were a feature.

The range of their activities for the rest of that year is awe-inspiring. A children's frolic, grand debutante ball, refreshment stall at the Ambulance Carnival, handicraft tuition at Mudgee, catering for a wedding, United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation clothing drive, whist afternoon, membership drive and social afternoon. And in November they held their first birthday and Melbourne Cup party at Kandos Golf House. We probably shouldn't be surprised that in September the secretary threatened resignation and in May the president became vice-president.

Within two years young women followed their mothers and the Kandos CWA Younger Set was formed: Shirley Howard president, Marie Schneider secretary and publicity officer, Vilma Sharrock treasurer, Rita Cosier, Joan Toms, Ailsa Sharrock, Ruth Moss and Jean Chapman vice-presidents. They were no doubt the mainstays of the CWA in future decades.

Most country towns have a CWA, not nearly as vibrant as yesteryear, but hanging on. I walk past the Kandos CWA building almost every day. It has recently had a face-lift and is looking quite chirpy, waiting no doubt for its no-dig gardens to herald the coming of spring.

The Kandos building is characteristic of its period and small town setting. Not a striking two story stone structure built to make a grand statement, like many of the old public buildings in country towns. No! A rectangular fibro box with a flat tin roof; two windows either side of French doors, with a protective overhang, give the appearance of a benign but humble face.

For the first five years Kandos CWA held their meetings wherever they could locate a suitable meeting room. In July 1951 they moved into their "new" CWA room, a "pleasant room" which members worked hard to make very presentable after Mrs Waters and Mrs Hayley had spray-painted it. However they aspired to their own building.

In 1956 they asked if council would subdivide the site on which the ambulance station was being built. The answer was no. They must have had the ear of some persuasive councillor (probably Williamson) and in 1958 steps were in place to transfer the land to the CWA and begin building. Ted Britt was the successful tenderer at £400. With a grant from the Joint Coal Board they purchased a piano. Two dozen chairs were bought from Loneragan's at almost £1 each. On 7 November 1959, just 14 years after the branch formed, they proudly opened their new premises.

As a child growing up in Mudgee, in a family where babies seemed to appear every two years, my main memory of the CWA is visiting the Baby Health Centre and watching the serious, efficient nurse in her starched uniform, weigh and measure my newest brother.

At Kandos the Baby Health Centre, established in 1938 by the cement company, was situated in a Fleming Street park, also donated by the company. Fashions change even in child-rearing and by the 1970s play groups and pre-schools were de rigueur. In 1971 the Rylstone Kandos Pre-School Kindergarten Association approached the CWA to have the baby health centre incorporated in the CWA rooms so that they could establish a pre-school in Fleming Street. With the agreement of all bodies involved, including the Department of Health, council drew up plans, applied for a relocation grant and received tenders from two local builders.

The additions, at the rear of the CWA, would consist of three rooms (waiting room, consulting room and test feed room) as well as sewerage connection. The estimated cost was

\$4,300 which included repainting, vinyl floor tiles and blinds for all areas. It was completed by October 1973.

There have been many changes since then, both at Kandos and to the CWA in general. Gone are the anthem, hats and younger groups. City accommodation at Greenknowe House, a great drawcard for membership, is closed and to be sold.

But CWA will still have a role in the twenty-first century while it adapts and innovates. At present Kandos CWA works with the Women's Hub to help women and children access life skills. Next year it will host the Kandos Gardens Fair on 2/3 April, including a display of no-dig gardens.

I wonder if they have considered planting "A Country Woman" rose, released in 1997 to celebrate the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of CWA.