

## **Betty Fisher Mrs Lawrence & Mrs Thomson**

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There are some stories of the great Depression that could be told about Port Adelaide.

One concerns two women, the only names I have so far found, Mrs Lawrence and her sister Mrs Thomson who are still remembered by working class people in the Port. They were nursing sisters. During the worst of the Depression they did the following:

They placed themselves on call at any time 24 hours a day for women needing help with childbirth, or with problems attendant on botched, back-yard abortions or with any problems arising from complicated child birth. Their services were free, night and day, any weather, any time of the year.

They organised the unemployed to raise money to help women in total penury and delivered to them sheets, blankets and total baby provisions to women left alone, sometimes without even a flock mattress on which to have their child. Someone would get word to Mrs Lawrence and she and her sister would ride their bicycles to that place, wash and clean the woman, prepare her for the birth, deliver the child, clean and tend the baby, ensure that the woman had enough to eat to help her milk begin for the baby. If the women were too starved for that they would ensure that a feeding bottle and milk was available for the baby. They would attend her several times a week after the woman had got help from the unemployed and neighbourhood women. They would then call on ad hoc occasions to ensure the baby and mother had attention.

During the Depression, many women with too many children to feed would resort to the despair of going to abortionists and often they were in great danger of septicemia. Mrs Lawrence and Mrs Thomson would be called or notes would be left for them to attend such cases. Often they would organize a doctor to attend and although so far we have no evidence of this, we know there were doctors who would set aside time to attend these women at the behest of Mrs Lawrence especially. She was highly regarded and valued by all the unemployed and destitute in the Port Adelaide area.

Mrs Lawrence was well known as a great speaker at Port Adelaide during the Great Depression. It was her speaking to the unemployed who urged them, particularly the women at the Port, to organize and cooperate together to help one another. Slowly this cooperative effort gathered momentum and the men of the various groups overcame their despair and began to form the groups and gradually the organizations of the unemployed.

It was Mrs Lawrence and Mrs Thomson who informed the unemployed men's groups of the low food value of the rations they were getting and urged them to insist on having beef placed on the rations. Scraggy mutton, often green with rot was the only meat for the unemployed on rations. Mrs Lawrence told the unemployed they and their children needed good beef and fresh fruit to eat. She urged them to plant fruit and vegetables if they could get the seeds and trees. She told them about planting fruit trees and nut trees and gave them practical outlines of what they could do to ensure that their children got enough to eat.

Mrs Lawrence and Mrs Thomson also talked to the women, urged them to learn by example from their mothers or neighbours how to pull apart and reknit woollen clothing and how to use rags to make peg rugs; how to use scraps to make colourful covers on hessian backed bed covers; she taught the men and women to find materials to make soap; then told them about the use of wood ash from domestic fires to sprinkle on the outdoor lavatory pans supplied by the council to reduce smells blow flies and infections from unclean lavatories. She lectured the women on insisting that everyone wash their hands before eating, she urged the unemployed to make and manage, to make items for sale and she fearlessly advocated helping one another when they were in danger of being evicted from their homes.

In Port Adelaide the women's groups from all walks of life organized regular weekly bazaars, trestle tables in the local hall stacked with items and produce to be sold for the benefit of the unemployed community. They were able to pay the wages of the Librarian at the Port Adelaide Institute. The

women's groups also organized and funded Christmas parties for the children at the Port Adelaide Institute. Every child got Christmas lunch and took away a pair of sandshoes (so they could go to school) and a bag of lollies.

Ask any of the old people at the Port, the old residents, who was the person they remembered who did the most for the unemployed and the names of these two women come to mind. "Oh yes, those women Mrs Lawrence and Mrs Thomson". They attended the poor on any and every occasion; they were there to attend the bashed and broken after strikes and bashings on the wharves. But they remained in the background, were part of the fabric of life, so often there, so much part of the life of those at the Port that they were never featured as heroic persons. They did what they did without any notoriety. In fact they avoided publicity and the working class protected them, never mentioned their names to the police who may be called in to ask questions about such matters as back yard abortionists. The law was extreme in those days on any matters surrounding abortion. These two women were never betrayed as the ones who would help patch up and mend the broken bodies and broken lives.

For this reason it has been impossible, despite talking to people from around the wharves and the district who knew them or knew of them, to find out even their first names let alone their background. About where they came from, where they learned their nursing, what first motivated them, who their own families were and what happened to them. Like most working class women, their self image was based on the requirement to do what was needed, quickly and with out remark.

It was known that they never discriminated. All persons were the same to them be they Aboriginal, women or men on the run for some misdeeds, especially seamen who did not want their origins known. If an interpreter was needed they would find one. If an Aboriginal family was in need of some one who would not discriminate, they were there. They worked with the Aboriginal women in midwifery and healing and would have learnt from them. They wanted to remain anonymous because they saw no purpose in any kind of notoriety in those times.

Times change. It is good to remember that Mrs Lawrence and Mrs Thomson existed but frustrating that there seem to be no details of their lives to give some background to the women themselves. Obviously they were educated; also they made no display of religion or religious dictates. But none can tell us more than that

"They were always there, they were called on all the time. Mrs Lawrence was a wonderful speaker."

That's all we find. They were great working class heroes.

## **References**

Page Michael, "Port Adelaide and its Institute 1851 -1976", Rigby Ltd, 1981