Memories of the Second World War (1939...1945)

CROW-BOX 5-3/26-DEC 3

By Ruth Crow
June 1984

Introduction

I was born in 1916 in Ballarat Victoria. I was married in 1937 and in 1940 my first daughter was born and in 1942 my second daughter. Thus I was in my early twenties at the beginning of the Second World War and both my daughters were born during the war.

In these memories I am mainly dealing with the period after Japan enters the war (i.e., the end of the year 1941). We were living in Windsor (Vic) at this time, but shifted to Brunswick in September 1943.

The War Effort and My Neighbours

I was an air raid warden and a war loans street secretary. These were voluntary responsibilities. I also did a course in First Aid and Home Nursing.

Each air raid warden looked after about thirty houses. We had to visit our neighbours to help them black out their windows, look for fire hazards, note where the tap and hose were located and make sure each home had a bucket of sand (for use to smother incendiary bombs). We also dug trenches in the playground of the state school and a little park.

On some Sunday mornings we would have air-raid exercises...mock air raid. We had a team of about six teenage boys who rode their bikes to deliver messages and who enjoyed running around with the air-raid rattle to warn people to prepare for the raid. We would pretend that some people were injured (they would have a note on them saying what had to be attended to) and we would have to arrange first aid for the injured.

As the street secretary for war loans I had to canvass my neighbours and ask them to buy at least a 6penny war loan stamp every week. Then each week I would do the rounds and collect the sixpences (or more). In streets where every one contributed to the war loans stamps there were signs on the posts at the corners saying "This is a war savings street" and the war-saving secretary had a notice on the window of their home.

What I Would Have Liked to Do to Help the War Effort

I had studied to be a dietitian and would have dearly loved to help with the catering services which were being developed at the munition factories and the wharves and other large war time industries. I believed it was very important to feed the people working to provide the weapons of war properly. The Government had a very good catering scheme and my husband, who worked at the munition factory had a very nourishing meal, very cheaply every day.

I could not help with this scheme as I had children to care for.

Wartime Day Nurseries...Women Must Work To Win

At the beginning of 1942 I helped to form a group of women who campaigned for day nurseries so more women could help in war time production.

We had the slogan "Day Nurseries, so Women can Work to Win." We had two ways of bringing attention to this need. Firstly we set up a day nursery which became the model of how such centres could be established. This was the South Yarra Day Nursery. Then, in addition we formed a coalition with a number of other women's groups and children's organisations to lobby the Federal Government for money to fund day nurseries.
By the beginning of June 1942 we opened the South Yarra Day Nursery in a church hall. We charged the parents 10/- a week and provided care from 7.30 a.m. to 6 p.m. The children had three meals a day and a very good program of activities. We paid a nurse and a kindergarten teacher and an assistant from the money paid in fees by the parents, but lots and lots of work was done by a roster of voluntary helpers (women almost all). This was quite a pioneering effort as up to that time there were only a few half day kindergartens and very few creches. The creches were very like orphanages and did not meet the needs of women entering the war industries. We catered for forty children from one year old to six.

The establishment of the example of the South Yarra Nursery greatly encouraged the campaign for Federal Government to take some responsibility for the children of working mothers. There was an organisation called the Council for Women in War Work and another one called The Co-ordinating Committee for Child Care in Wartime. I represented the South Yarra Day Nursery on the Committee for Co-ordinating Child Care in Wartime.

The establishment of the example of the South Yarra Nursery greatly encouraged the campaign for Federal Government to take some responsibility for the children of working mothers. There was an organisation called the Council for Women in War Work and another one called The Co-ordinating Committee for Child Care in Wartime. I represented the South Yarra Day Nursery on the Committee for Co-ordinating Child Care in Wartime. The South Yarra Day Nursery also helped other groups of women to work together to establish day nurseries and by the end of 1942 or early 1943 there were similar nurseries in Kew, Caulfield and Hawthorn. All of these were run with the help of voluntary helpers, most of whom were young mothers like I was. We were able to take our children to the day nursery. For example I went to the South Yarra Day Nursery with my two year old and my baby and I helped every day.

The Committee for Co-ordinating Child Care in Wartime became concerned about the care of school age children and it was decided to establish some type of care for children in Brunswick. In August 1943 I started work as the organising secretary of the Brunswick Children's Centre. I was paid from a grant received from the Commonwealth Government. This was the first funding received for children's services from the Commonwealth Government.

The Brunswick Children's Centre

The Brunswick Children's Centre cared for children from babies to teenagers. My responsibilities included the co-ordination of the existing day nursery and kindergarten and the provision of a midday meal, after school activities and holiday play days for school age children.

The centre served children attending Albert St Central School, St. Ambrose Catholic School, the Brunswick Girls' School and the Brunswick Boys School. We served meals to about one hundred children. The meal was a hot two course meal with plenty of vegetables, meat, and fresh fruit etc. I have some of the menus and some of the dietary analysis of the food value of the meals. We had a cook, assistant cook, cleaner, two part time recreation leaders at the School Centre and I cannot remember the staffing at the other two sections of the Centre, except that for the first time the creche employed well qualified staff and at the kindergarten then open all day, employed a number of women who were called "child care workers." The younger children were cared for at the creche and the children aged from about six to 12 were cared for at the kindergarten. The hall used for school meals, the school where we had a school activities and the day nursery and creche were located fairly close to each other and the three sections had a joint committee and numerous joint social functions.
One of my responsibilities was to organise the voluntary helpers for the three sections of the Centre. At least seven women helped every day with the school meals. A number of organisations in Brunswick accepted responsibility for rostering the centre in one particular day a week. If you are interested in what women did during the war you can find out from some of my documents how women helped in a voluntary capacity to set up such services as the Brunswick Children's Centre. We had young women, middle aged women and elderly women helping. The roster included some women who were on shift work. The Government Needed Campaign

By the beginning of 1943 the Federal Government had heeded the campaign for child care and about ten of the half day kindergartens were extended to full day care.

The wartime powers by which the Federal Government was able to fund such services were not able to continue after the war because of the loss of the 1944 referendum. When the war finished in 1945 the wartime nurseries only continued for a few more months before the funding was withdrawn. The referendum was lost in 1944 but the Government was able to continue until the war ended.

Where Did the Brunswick Women Work

I have some records of where the mothers worked. Some made parachutes at Holeproof (they made silk stockings before the war), others worked at Millers Rope Factory making ropes for the ships and for the air force etc; others were clothing trade workers. We did not have any children whose mothers worked in the actual munitions factory as it was a fair way away from Brunswick. The women who were employed at the School Section of the Brunswick Children's Centre all had children of their own and accepting a job as a cook, play leader etc was quite a big step for them as they did not expect to become employed when they were mothers.

How the War Affected My Living Conditions

There was a great housing shortage during the war and in order to accept the appointment at Brunswick we had to shift to some place in Brunswick. It was very difficult indeed to find any sort of accommodation, but eventually we did find a very small flat which became our home for the next fourteen years. So my children went to school in Brunswick and Brunswick and Coburg became our home areas.

My husband was working in the munitions factory at Footscray and he could have a very nourishing meal every day (a three course meal for 1/4). The children had their main meals at Children's Centre and so did I. Thus there was no need for me to spend a great deal of time on home cooking.

We did not suffer through having to use coupons for food and clothing. The rationing was quite O.K. for us.

Through the children's centres at South Yarra and Brunswick I was able to meet and work with many different types of women and made some last lasting friends. Through being able to work, at first as a voluntary helpers, and later as a paid worker, I was not isolated in the home. The women who were employed and who were volunteers at the Centre also enjoyed these opportunities for a more social life.