

Memories of the Thirties  
For Students at Princes Hill High School  
Ruth Crow, 7. 8. '91

1933 Shop Assistant in the dress department at Mantons Department Store in Bourke Street Melbourne.

Work conditions

Hours of work Mon. Tues, Wed, Thurs, from 9 am to 6 pm., Fridays from 9 am to 9 pm. and Saturdays from 9 am to 1 pm.

No training but I was warned by employer that my body would ache from head to toe but that I would soon get used to that.

There was a lunch room furnished with tables and forms.

My wages were 14/6 a week.

Shop assistants had to wear black dresses

The Work

My main job, as a "junior", was picking up dresses and placing them on hangers, tidying tables etc I rarely had an opportunity for selling anything.

I was frequently sent messages to clothing factories to collect some of the dresses. The places I went to were mainly in Little Flinders Street. Running these messages gave me a very thorough understanding of the central area of Melbourne and a glimpse of the working conditions in some of the factories of the 1930s.

Several times I was sent to a boutique in one of the city arcades to help the assistant. This shop was owned by Mantons and sold the same garments as the main store but at a higher price.

When salesmen came to the store I was used as a model for SW dresses.

I just loved the lights in the city on Friday nights.

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1934 Domestic servant ("A Maid") in homes of some fairly well-to-do people.

Work Conditions

Hours of work from morning (say 6.30 am or 7 am) to night (sometimes after 9 pm.) six days a week.

No training, employer depended on your "upbringing"

This was a live-in job so the "maid" could be "on call" all day and evening (until after supper).

The wage was about 12/- a week plus board (all meals and a private bedroom and my own bathroom).

The Work

The work included all house cleaning, preparing meals, waiting on table, washing up, ironing, answering the door, and preparing food for special occasions (afternoon tea and supper).

"Maids" had to wear an apron and a cap. For serving at evening meals and at supper a black dress and white cap and apron were expected.

Improving the conditions of work

A large proportion of domestic servants were young girls from the country. They lived very isolated lives in the big houses in suburbs such as Toorak and Malvern.

I thought that one step to improve the conditions under which domestic servants worked was to form a social club. So, in 1936 I helped in an attempt to establish a Domestic Servants Club in Malvern.

We invited the "maids" to come to a meeting place through an article in one of the daily papers. About 30 to 40 women (mostly young) joined the club which was mainly just for friendship. It existed for several months but it was destroyed for two reasons.

1. An older women (who had been a domestic servant some years before) had the ambition of becoming the first woman in the Federal Parliament and began to use the Club as a jumping off ground for her campaign.
2. The Miscellaneous Workers Union heard of the club and tried to "unionise the girls". This was far too radical a solution to their problems.

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1936 A Cook in a Private (Church) Hospital

Work Conditions

Hours of work from 7 am to 2 pm and then from 4.30 pm to 8 pm. It was usual for most of the staff to rest in the afternoon.

We worked six days a week.

Living-in conditions were deplorable. The bedrooms were partitioned cubicles so that it was difficult to have quietness during the afternoon rest period. The domestics' dining room was shabbily furnished and the supply of cutlery and crockery was so poor that the domestic staff hid their knives and forks and plates etc so that they could have them at meal time.

There was no recreation room for the domestics, not even a radio.

My wage as a cook was 30/- (pus keep) a week but the "maids" received about 10/- (plus keep) a week. A large proportion of the younger "maids" had been brought up in a Church "Home". Some were just 14 years of age and expected to do very heavy work, washing large, heavy pots etc.

There were frequent occasions when the girls burst into tears.

The Work

My work was to plan the menus and cook breakfast, dinner and tea for about 100 members of staff. (nurses, domestics etc) The main cooking equipment was gas and steam.

Improving the conditions of work

I was really shocked about the living conditions, wages and the heavy work for young women at this hospital. I went to the Hospital Employees Union in the hope of getting some changes. The organiser of the Union told the Hospital Matron of my concern. I was sacked. My main personal gain was that I learnt a bit about how to organise on the job and how not to trust some unions.

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1937 A waitress in the Railway Refreshment Rooms

Working Conditions

The hours I worked were from 8 am to 2, 30 pm and from 4.30 pm to 7.30 pm. or a "straight shift" from 10.30 am. to 8 pm. six days a week.

Waitresses wore a uniform supplied by the Railways but laundered by them.

There was a reasonably comfortable staff room with lockers.

Wages were about 25/- a week plus meals.

A fairly high proportion of the waitresses were daughters of country railway employees and a hostel in West Melbourne provided some accommodation for them.

Railway employees had travel concession on all suburban railway lines and after each year the employee received a free pass to travel anywhere in Australia (but part of the fare had to be paid to Western Australia).

The Work

Most waitresses waited on eight chairs but some of had 12 chairs. The Refreshment Rooms were very busy, especially on race days and during Show Week.

Meals at Railway Refreshment Rooms cost 1/6 for three courses... soup, meat plus potatoes two other vegetables and a dessert... steamed pudding, baked custard and fruit, apple pie and cream etc., The RRR also served "light refreshments". sandwiches, cake, toasted raisin bread.

The Railways popularised fruit drinks and salads and for part of my time i was employed to make salads to be photographed to advertise that the Refreshment Rooms had such new types of dishes on the menu.

Most RRR waitresses aspired to work on the Sydney Express as a waitress or a "hostess".

Improving the conditions of work.

I was able to work much more effectively with the union (the Australian Railways Union, ARU) and eventually the award for waitresses was improved through the work of Linda Chapel one of the waitresses at Flinders Street.

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Resource Material on Personal Histories

For further information about my life in the 1930s see report of an interview in "Weevils in Flour" by Wendy Lowenstein.

Other material available from the Crow Collection (Victoria University of Technology, Footscray Campus) :-

A tape "Another Time, Another Place" an interview with Ruth Crow on 3RRR and another interview for the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology on life at Emily McPherson College in the 1930s. (Note Emily McPherson College is now part of RMIT)

Drafts of my personal history are also available. They are called the "Golden Years of Childhood in the Golden City of Ballarat" and "The Grey Days of the Depression in Early Teen Years".

The Crow Collection also has some unusual material on the lives of other men and women. For example :-

"A Proletarian Life" by Audrey Blake who was born in 1916, the same year as my birth, but who had a very different childhood from mine.

"As We Were" draft of the history of the Food Preservers Union by Madge Wood who worked for that union for about 40 years.

"The Life of Henrietta Greville" a labour stalwart in NSW from the late 1898s to the 1940s.

"Doris McRae... A Principled Principal" one of the first Victorians to study to become a secondary teacher who later was a High Schol Principal.

The Crow Collection is a resource for secondary school students as well as students from tertiary institutions. Some of the documents in the Crow Collection are on the IBNS catalogue with the preface Crow Coll, but not all documents have been catalogued yet.

Access to the Crow Collection is available when ever the Footscray Campus Library is open. I am at the Library from 10.30 am to 2. 30 pm. each Tuesday and Thursday and by appointment by phoning 380.1876.

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Personal Comments  
A Tertiary Student in the mid 1930s  
by Ruth Crow 7/ 8/ '91

The Undignified Position of My Mother in Our Family

I was born in 1916 in Ballarat. Our family came to live in Melbourne when my father died and we were left penniless in 1931. My brothers had work in Melbourne. My two brothers (20 and 18) and my sister (16) were the bread winners for the family of six.

At quite an early age I became very concerned about the position of women in society. My mother had been a school teacher but there was no opportunity for her to re-enter the work force when she was widowed. She had the undignified position of being dependent on her young sons and daughters for the family income.

A Highly Motivated Student

In 1934 I was given a "free Place" for the Diploma Course at Emily McPherson College of Domestic Economy. In 1935 I was awarded a Senior Technical Scholarship on the basis of my first years' work. This meant I was given an allowance of 30 pounds a year (13/4 a week). This compared fairly well with the wages Junior typists were receiving (about 15/- a week).

I could not afford to buy any text books but studied in the Public library. I had to take lots of notes which probably re-enforced my learning.

While at Emily McPherson College I worked as a domestic in the vacations. This was very unusual and other students would have "looked down on me" if I told them I had to work to pay for my course, so I did not tell them.

With the extra money I earned as a domestic I was able to contribute to the family as much money as my sisters who were employed as junior clerks.

Diploma students at Emily McPherson College studied chemistry and physics at the Working Men's College (Melbourne Tech, now known as the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology). There were about 12 women students and about 50 men students and although I did not have the pre-requisite subjects (I had not had the chance to study chemistry and physics at secondary school) I was top student, with much higher marks than the men. I was a very highly motivated student.

No jobs for Married Women

I completed my Diploma but could not afford the extra year to be trained as a dietitian. It cost 20 pounds, plus uniforms and no wage for 12 months. The courses for Home Economic Teachers had been closed down. In any case I wanted to marry, and married women were debarred from such careers as I had chosen.

I used my maiden name at the Railway Refreshment Rooms as the railways would not employ married women. I could not use my maiden name in places where I was well known.

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# A lifetime working for social justice

**B**ETWEEN the two of them, Ruth and Maurie Crow made the North Melbourne Association a thriving and energetic community group.

However, their community involvement was not restricted to geographic borders.

Since the early 1940s, Ruth has been a local activist in campaigns affecting living standards such as childcare, improved education and better health care.

Maurie concentrated on union issues and urban planning.

The energetic husband and wife team also took on the government over the F19 freeway, the demolition of historically and socially important buildings and over the issue of conservation of energy.

Mr Crow was also instrumental in the creation and establishment of Melbourne City Council's Strategy Plan because he believed the inner-urban areas had to be protected through a fixed strategy and not simply left to become the victim of trends.

Their efforts did not go unrecognised.

In 1972 the Royal Australian Institute of Architects recognised "the notable contribution to the literature of the built environment" made by Ruth and Maurie Crow by awarding them one of the first Robin Boyd Awards.

And again in 1973 their efforts were honoured by the Town and Country Planning Association which presented them with the Barrett Medal for Town Planning.

On May 8, more than 400 people attended a memorial service to pay tribute to North Melbourne identity, Maurie Crow. Earlier, all political differences were put aside at Melbourne Town Hall as councillors stood for a minute's silence in respect. Just before his death, Maurie Crow celebrated his golden wedding anniversary with his partner in political persuasion, Ruth.

**KAREN MURPHY** talked to Ruth Crow this week.

Ruth and Maurie met at an anti-fascist youth meeting in 1936 when they were both at university.

"One of the special things about Maurie was his attitude to women," she said.

"At that camp we had a discussion about the position of women and also social problems which came up because of the Nazi view of women which was kitchen, church and children.

"Maurie was concerned about the position of women long before the issue became popular," she said.

"But Maurie believed that things should change in so many aspects of life and he stood strongly behind his beliefs.

"He was gentle but very courageous and persistent."

Ruth and Maurie Crow moved to North Melbourne from Coburg in 1964, after they had established the Coburg Hiroshima Memorial March.

"We moved to North Melbourne long before it became trendy to live close to the city but we liked the mixture it provided," Ruth said.

"And both of us felt it was important to get involved in that community.

"Maurie wasn't only concerned about getting better physical, environment and



Ruth Crow: "naturally a lot of unfinished business".

around trying to decide who they should talk to, who they should be seen with and where they should sit.

"It made people confront each other and there were some peculiar conflicts.

"I suppose I shouldn't laugh at Maurie's funeral but it really was so fulfilling but naturally

there is a lot of unfinished business.

"I think the best way of paying tribute to him is for people to carry on that business like finding and voting for Melbourne City Council candidates who support the strategy plan.

"That is what Maurie would have wanted."