

A history of women in the Brunner Volunteer Fire Brigade

By Robb Lunn, CFO Brunner VFB, 3/11/2008

The situation of women joining the Brunner Volunteer Fire Brigade occurred in 1968 when the last of the Dobson State Coal Miners finally completed salvaging materials from the closed Dobson Colliery.

The men had to leave the Fire District for work and this resulted in a lack of personnel to respond during the day. In those days of course women didn't work and a very resourceful group of housewives stepped forward and accepted the challenge.

The original group was: Mrs Nora Bernard, Joyce Creagh, Sue Logan, Jean Lunn, and Catherine Smith. Mrs Creagh and Mrs Wylie were sisters, and daughters of the original Chief Fire Officer Jim Carson (MBE and MM) who had had extensive service with the Hanmer Springs VFB before shifting to Dobson. They were trained by a few of the older members of the Brigade, namely Alf Smith, Jim Carson, and Francis (Ted) Lawson.

The group served for approximately seven years and provided sterling service to the then Fire Boards. They responded to all manner of incidents and emergencies with very little in the way of equipment or protective clothing – no breathing apparatus or crew cab appliances either.

Call numbers were quite high during this period, also, as it seemed that you just burned your house down for the insurance money – with all that activity the only serious injury incurred by the women was a chest injury received when a hose coupling let go, hitting the pump operator. It speaks volumes for their good firemanship and self preservation.

As all of the group, apart from a much older Mrs Smith, were 50 when they joined the seven years that they served made considerable demands on their bodies, but they never shirked their responsibilities, and were well respected by their male counterparts.

Also during that seven years, the township re-gathered, and prospective members again filled the homes and businesses places enabling the Brigade to fill to full compliment and give the originals a well earned rest.

One major bone of contention at the time was that the United Fire Brigades Association would not recognise the women's service with their honours system. Attempts were made at two separate conferences to change the rules but it was considered inappropriate that women should be fulfilling the traditional fireman's role and little sympathy was shown to the cause. This, I have learnt in later years, was not helped by the fact that the Brunner Brigade was relying on proxy [voting] to put the case and may have feared better if it had sent delegates.

In the following years pre-fire service commission, Mrs Kay Halmshaw and Irene Cleghoren served for about 12 months. Then, since early 1980, there has been a steady succession of members with Mrs Heather Dunn, Linda Hayes, Vivienne Butcher, Bronwyne Thompson, Lawonda Cowan, Jill Cowan Nicola Graham, Lisa

Wakeford, Wendy Hurney and Jayne McClintock serving. Of note Viv Butcher is currently in Kirwee VFB and has 16 years [service]. Also Lawonda Cowan [has] done 7 years and was a firefighter in the New Zealand Army.

It is indeed strange how things have come around, for what we know forty years is now the done thing, and politically correct. Heck we even have paid female firefighters.

The Brunner VFB will celebrate its 50th Jubilee on Queen's Birthday Weekend next year [2009]. We will recognise the important and perhaps pivotal involvement of our women over 4 decades. We'll acknowledge all the roles they have played apart from firefighting, namely secretaries and treasurers, competition runners and officials, fund raisers and good all round workers. Also the fact that apart from the obvious physical strength, they are every bit our equal.

I am confident women will have a place in this Brigade as long as they have the gumption to come forward initially, as they soon adapt to Fire Service life.