

ALBURY'S FLORAL FESTIVALS

Report of a presentation by Victoria Cooper (presented at A&DHS General Meeting, June 2013 and reprinted from A&DHS Bulletin No 535)

Victoria has been researching the Floral Festivals, which were held in Albury between 1951 and 1972. She was able to talk to a wide range of people who were involved and the Albury City photographic collection has grown considerably. The event had a brief revival in the 1980s, but did not continue, so she has focused on the original 21 year span of the festival, including:

- Festival beginnings and the influence of Mayor Cleaver Bunton;
- The type of festival it was and the events it contained;
- The Queen competition and what this meant for the women involved and the festival itself; and
- Fundraising and strong community efforts behind the festival.



Opening in 1951 to a crowd of 8,000 the Albury Floral Festival had a triumphant start. Dean Street was decorated with lines of potted trees and shrubs. Even the Town Hall (now the Art Gallery) was decorated inside and out to resemble a garden. A further 10,000 attended the grand finale held on the Saturday. Staged as a celebration to mark the Golden Jubilee of Australian Federation, the week-long event culminated in a procession of musicians, floats, school children and potential Floral Festival queens along Dean Street to the Sports-ground.

The festival was the brainchild of Albury's mayor, Cleaver Bunton, who took his inspiration from the Grafton Jacaranda Festival. He is remembered as one of the older generation with an old way of talking to the younger women of the queen competition, and as a great speaker, persuading people to continue their hard work.

The first festival was held in the month of March, but was moved to November in 1953. The bad weather in November 1954 caused a rethink and a return to March in 1956, skipping 1955. Usually it began on the Monday after Melbourne's Moomba Festival, and included a queen competition, balls and dances, band recitals, art, photographic and garden competitions and a Hampstead Heath street fête. Many people remember the time of the Floral Festival as being celebratory and charitable.

In 1951, the culmination of the festival was the parade along Dean Street with hundreds of people turning out to view the parade. Some got a grandstand view by standing on the shop awnings above the street. The procession ended in the Sportsground where over 3000 school children formed an outline map of Australia with the children forming the State boundaries moving to form the word "Jubilee" while the infants formed the figures 1951 thus marking the 50th anniversary of Federation.

The profits from the first three festivals covered most of the cost of the Memorial Bowl on Monument Hill and helped Albury Council to meet the cost of building the War Memorial Civic Theatre. In 1953 there was a call for each organisation to be allowed to use funds raised to support their own needs, or their chosen charity. In return, the work that the community groups

put into keeping the Floral Festival going over the years saw each one improve on the previous year's success.

From 1953, three competitions were held: the best float, the most money raised, and the Floral Festival Queen. The festival was a big deal; there was the fund-raising, float making, preparations of dresses and many social events to consider. For these committees, it was not just a week-long event; there were months of preparation.

Behind each candidate was a group of people working hard to win. The competition was friendly, however; all had their job to do in raising money and awareness. They sold buttons, had stalls in the Hampstead Heath held on Dean Street, and held fund-raising nights through bingo or a ball. They could be as creative as they liked.

In 1972, Kentucky Fried Chicken candidate, Pamela Cohen, organised a concert in the Memorial Bowl that attracted 800 people to hear a dozen bands from the Albury-Wodonga area.

Some even caused a stir by holding raffle nights. The *Border Morning Mail* reported on 14 April 1952 that Rev. Robert McMillan thought Albury was conducting a gambling racket 'second to none' in its history, thanks to the Floral Festival's apparent, 'free for all licence' to conduct chocolate wheels and raffles, a form of gambling.

Saturday was the grand finale: the big parade. All the hard work paid off in the display of beautiful elaborate floats with their queen candidate as they made their way along Young and Dean Streets towards the Albury Sportsground along with the bands, excited children, clowns, marching girls and community groups. It was followed by what was termed in the newspapers as the Mardi Gras, usually held at the Sportsground. There would be motorcycle and chariot races, stunt displays, and the arrival of the parade of floats with the queen candidates. Then would follow the crowning ceremony for the prestigious Floral Festival Queen, then a concert and ball for more dancing and fun!

A Floral Festival coach was officially presented to Cleaver Bunton at the Citizen Military Forces drill hall on Friday 6 May 1964 by members of the 8/13 Victorian Mounted Rifles Workshops who had restored it using original materials except for the canvas hood which needed to be replaced. Alderman Bunton stated that it was "a coach worthy of a floral festival and of the efforts of the committees and candidates, and will get the 1964 Floral Festival off to the best start ever."

The coach carried the previous year's queen, Dorothy Pepper, to the Sportsground in the afternoon parade, and then took the newly crowned queen, Colleen Schoff, to the Town Hall where she appeared on the balcony to wave to a thousand excited viewers in Dean Street.

The competition was always stiff. In 1969, half a point separated the six candidates! Judging began on the opening day when each candidate was introduced to the judges. During the following week they were further assessed during the various events, including the Wednesday night ball, and an interview. Judging for the 1964 competition was completed with 50 points from each judge; 30 to apply to the candidate (including deportment and behaviour at the various events), 10 to her attendants and 10 to her float.

The candidates trained together. In the early years, they were trained by Raie Langley; in 1961, by Jean Dunstan; while Jan Skinner, who was herself, crowned the final queen in 1972, trained the candidates in the later years. They were a group of young women in a new situation together and long-lasting friendships were often made.

Betty Ward (later Steer) was working as a ticket-writer and window-dresser for the G. J. Coles department store when she was asked to represent the store in the first Floral Festival. The

colourful Easter-themed float was made near the Coles store, in an alley off Dean Street near the Globe Hotel. Betty told Victoria that she remembered they would hide the float. There was keen rivalry so the theme and design of the float was a closely guarded secret. Betty's attendants on the float were Marie Jacobs and Pat Cotter. The *Border Morning Mail* reported that during the parade, Betty's fellow staff members formed a cheer squad outside the store and cheered her as she passed.

Moresby Park Pre-school's 1959 float featured Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. Heather Faulkhead (now Heijnus) was the candidate and the dwarfs were pre-schoolers who were tied in position as a safety measure. The float used flowers saved from the previous year. The minutes recorded, "we were all weary after the Floral Festival but when we saw the float entering the arena we were all very proud of ourselves and the people who helped us."

Coral Hague (now Close) was a new nurse-in-training at the Albury Base Hospital and was for the first time living away from home. Amongst all this, Coral agreed to be the Floral Festival representative. She prepared for this, with the help of many others including her friend and floral attendant Jeanette Sharp, in any spare time. This included making the flowers. Everyone would be in the common rooms, making those flowers following the instructions of the ABH Floral Festival committee, which was a creative team.

It was an exciting time; she remembers the hard but positive work that was involved. Mostly it was the overall spirit of community and social goals and working together. Coral went on to be crowned Floral Festival Queen in 1959. Her crown was made from fresh flowers by local florist, Ron Martin.

Margaret Ryan (now Lenehan) won the Floral Festival Queen competition in 1961 while representing the Mercy Hospital. She was happy to do her part to help raise much needed funds. All local hospitals such as Albury Base Hospital, Mercy and Wodonga, were able to reach funding that was not, in those days, available from the government. For the Mercy Hospital in 1961, it was a very big deal as they were in need of the funding. It was their first floral festival entry and they won all three categories – Queen, float and money raised.

Jan Skinner represented the Wildlife Conservation Society in the final Floral Festival in 1972. Her attendants were Jenny Collins (Duncan) and Margaret O'Keefe (Roach). It was not Jan's first experience with the festival; as a child she had twice won the prize for the best decorated bike and later she trained the queen candidates. Jan designed her own dress, buying special material in Melbourne and having it made by her aunt, Lucy Holmes. She wanted the dress to have a sparkle to it, but not look glittery and found some perfect netting. Jan remembers waving from the balcony of the Civic Centre to a large crowd of around 5000 people.

There were many challenges along with successes throughout the Albury Floral Festival's 21 years, but overall, the support and celebration of the local community provided entertainment for the people of Albury and raised tens of thousands of dollars each year for local causes. The best photographic re-cord of the annual event was compiled by Albury photographer, Jack Dallinger and may be viewed on the Flickr website.