

DOWERIN FIELD DAYS — WOMEN IN THE WHEATBELT

Statement

HON MIA DAVIES (Agricultural) [9.37 pm]: I rise tonight to talk briefly about a presentation I gave at the Dowerin Field Days. Actually, it was not a presentation; I was invited to open the Dowerin Field Days this year, which was a great thrill as I have attended the field days since I was a young child. I was asked to speak in light of the fact that it was also the centenary of International Women's Day this year. I would like to go through the research that I did on women in the Wheatbelt, in particular around Dowerin, just to give members an insight into some of the things I learned while preparing for the speech.

I have attended the Dowerin Field Days since I was a young girl growing up on the family farm in Wyalkatchem. As I said, it was a great thrill for me to be asked to open the event. We are in field day season. These field days have a special role in bringing together people in the regions from within the community and from right across the state. I had the pleasure of staying at the Dowerin Bed and Breakfast. People from as far north as Carnarvon to as far south as Boyup Brook stayed there both nights too. It was fantastic. They had all come to the Dowerin Field Days for various reasons, whether they were exhibitors or visitors. It was wonderful. The Dowerin Field Days is a premier event in the local calendar and has been around for 47 years. It is under the care of Dowerin Events Management, which has exceptional skills in organising what is a large event in a small town. It relies heavily on volunteers, local business owners and local community members to billet people who are coming into town, to stand at the gates and the rest of it. It is a huge event.

I suspect that the reason I was asked to open the show, aside from the centenary of International Women's Day, was the fact that I am the only female who represents the Agricultural Region in state Parliament. The reflections that I made were on some of the inspirational women, past and present, who trod the path to Dowerin and the Wheatbelt and helped shape the communities that we are part of. Before European settlement, the Balladong people were the traditional owners of the land, and they have been the custodians of that land for many years. Their history became entwined with ours at the time of European settlement and when the likes of my ancestors arrived in the Wheatbelt seeking to live off the land, albeit in a different way.

One hundred years ago, when International Women's Day first began, a number of women were already living in and around Dowerin. European settlement began in Dowerin in 1897, and the town was established in 1906. A number of pioneering families remain prominent in the Wheatbelt today, particularly in and around Dowerin. Women played a central role, but as my staff and I found when we were researching this speech, this fact was not formally recorded and it was quite difficult to find formal recognition of or historical references to the women. As we went through our research, we relied heavily on people who still lived in the town, which was good; it was interesting. The harsh conditions of the Wheatbelt meant that it was not really a place for a European woman, with her long skirts and pale skin, but I know from personal experience that all our families have stories about women who rolled up their sleeves and gave it a good go. As the men were clearing the land, the women set about creating the homes for their families and raising their children. There was a lot of discussion in the historical material that we could find about them really being the first community development officers of our communities. We found that they either arrived with their partners, their husbands, or via different routes. We have records from as early as 1853 that show that a group of Irish women arrived in the Toodyay immigrant depot following a request from a local Mr Harris to the Governor. He said that "scarcely one single female of marriageable age was to be found in this residency" and he requested "a liberal number of needlewomen be placed in the district". This was at a time when women were judged against nineteenth century ideas of a smaller head: our brains were small compared with men's and we were incapable of logical thought! It was also a time when the issue of pay, let alone equal pay, was decades over the horizon. Yet we played a fundamental role in the development of the region, its communities and its key industries. As I said, women took a role in their communities; they formed groups, they organised sporting and social days and they started charitable organisations to look after the less fortunate. They were multiskilling and multitasking long before they were things that could be put on a resume. The women in Dowerin were no exception.

The pioneering names associated with Dowerin are those of Couper, Place, Anderson, Stewart and Fraser; there are more, and I am very careful to say that I have not got them all, because of course we will miss somebody out! The references to the women in these families are typically in relation to this stoic acceptance of primitive conditions, taking on family life and working side-by-side with their husbands. While preparing for the speech, I read that Allan Cooke's mother carted water from a soak hole in a 50-gallon tank hitched to a sledge hauled by a horse. I also read about Len Robinson's father, who returned from the First World War with his French wife. She must have felt so far from the thriving metropolis of Paris when she was faced with the prospect of a 50-kilometre horseback ride to Goomalling for the delivery of her first child and the three others after that! As the district and the families began to grow, the women taught their children, they nursed them through illness and they worked the land, and they did this without the assistance of modern household devices such as washing

machines, dishwashers or communication tools and without the support of family or any kind of formal medical or educational support services. In and around Dowerin women played a key role in developing the business services of the town. Mrs Stacy was responsible for opening the town's first store. This was followed by the first bakehouse, opened by Mrs Ayling, and a dining room, run by Mrs Allan. Another prominent pioneering woman, Mrs O'Shaughnessy, moved to Dowerin to be with her husband in 1915 and they built the home that serves as the town's museum to this day. Her daughter, Mrs Carmel Redding, remains very involved in promoting Dowerin's heritage, and she was a great help to me as I was preparing for this speech.

To go slightly further afield, a significant example of pioneering women in the region was Mrs Adams of Mangowine. The Mangowine homestead can still be visited as part of our pioneering history. It was home to not only the Adams and generations of their family, but also the first Country Women's Association of Western Australia purpose-built rest room. Members have heard me talk about the importance of the CWA in regional communities and the role that these women played in nurturing their communities. We found that when Dowerin CWA, which was established by Mrs Macey in 1929, celebrated its sixtieth anniversary, four members recorded exceptional service, having served 50 years. They were Mrs Glad George, Mrs May Metcalf, Mrs Coral Henning and Mrs Mary Richards. More than 20 years later, we still have the CWA in Dowerin, and Mrs Margaret Bartlett and her ladies still play a key role in providing services and support for their community. It is a powerful and enduring role that they hold through that organisation.

There are also a number of women in the town, but I am going to run short on time to talk about them all. However, I was delighted to walk into the Dowerin art group's exhibition on the first day of the Dowerin Field Days and see that somebody had chosen to do a painting of Mrs Milly Lee. The painting depicts Mrs Lee with a number of medals on her jacket, one of which is for 50 years service to the Red Cross. There are other ladies, such as Mrs Mary Richards, who is over 90 years of age and still bakes and supports fundraising efforts for sporting and various other services in the town. There is Mrs Thelma Hatwell and Reverend Norma Metcalf, who is the Anglican reverend in the town and services the district. There are some really progressive women who have been involved in the community and who are still driving it forward.

In the Wheatbelt we also on a much broader scale have two regional champions—namely, Caroline Robinson from Woollocutty near Narembeen and Sue Middleton from Wongan Hills. Caroline is the current national Australian rural industries research and development council's rural woman of the year and Sue Middleton from Wongan Hills is last year's. We have two women, both from the Wheatbelt, who in a national forum have been selected and recognised for their contribution to agriculture and their communities, which is outstanding and should not go unnoted.

I really had a wonderful time presenting some of this research in the opening speech at Dowerin Field Days. I thank Mrs Carmel Reading and Mrs Shirley Anderson for their assistance. I also thank Clare Creegan in my office for doing a lot of that legwork, talking to the members of the community and allowing me to do it, because it gave me a real thrill as a woman from the Wheatbelt to be able to present some of that back to the community and celebrate that.