

# ORBOST & DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY INC.

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## NEWSLETTER

No. 85, March 2012

### The 1891 Petition for Women's Suffrage and one woman who signed her name

The story of the 1891 petition is a story of the way in which people in a democracy can work with energy and commitment to bring about change. It is inspirational and in these times of rapid change and uncertainty some 120 years later, reminds us of the fight for a hard-won privilege, which many people take for granted and some do not value.

The whole story of women's suffrage in Victoria is a curious one. While they were not granted the vote by Parliamentary legislation until 1908, women first voted in Victoria in 1864 and therein lies a tale.

#### **The 1864 election**

Male suffrage was granted for Lower House elections in Victoria in 1857. This suffrage was subject to property qualifications i.e. only men who owned property had the right to vote.

In 1863, municipal rolls were used to compile the electoral roles for colonial Parliaments. Thus the Electoral Act setting up the conditions for the 1864 election referred to "all persons" listed on the municipal rolls and as women with property were listed on these rolls, they were able to vote in the 1864 election.

The first (all male) Parliament hastily amended the faulty legislative drafting which had brought about this situation— early in 1865, an amendment was passed by the Members of the Legislative Assembly which restricted voting in Parliamentary elections to "all male rate payers", thereby removing women's right to vote, although women property owners were not, at the same time, exempted from paying rates and taxes. It seems that the Members were "both shocked by the effrontery of the women and embarrassed by their mistake". Thus, ironically, Victoria was both the first State in which women voted and the last to legislate to allow women to vote in Parliamentary elections and to stand as Members of Parliament.

#### **1891 in Victoria**

In 1891, there was something of a groundswell in opinion in favour of granting women the right to vote. Several factors had contributed to this:

Internationally, two US states had granted women the vote.

In Victoria, the 1872 Education Act provided for the education of females as well as males and so girls were able to attend schools and get the elements of an education.

In 1884, the Married Women's Property Act provided married women with the right to own and dispose of property in their own right.

Also in 1884, the Victorian Women's Suffrage Society was founded by Henrietta Dugdale and Annie Lowe.

In the 1880s, local branches of the Women's Christian Temperance Union were formed in Victoria.

**The Temperance movement and Women's Suffrage**

Women's Temperance groups aimed to reduce the excessive use of alcohol and its deleterious effects on family life. The Women's Christian Temperance Union began in the United States and when Mary Clement Levitt, from Boston, visited Australia in 1885, local branches of the Temperance Union were formed. In Victoria, two women, Mary Love from the US and Marie Kirk from England arrived in 1886 and their work brought the separate local branches together to form one network. By 1887, there were 16 branches, including one in Bairnsdale. The motto "For God, Home and Humanity" and the focus on the importance of home and family life were attractive to the women in the colonies, who were faced with many challenges in making a home and raising their children in often harsh conditions.

Women's suffrage was seen as one way to achieve the aims of the temperance movement. If women could vote, the voting numbers would be doubled; most women would support the aims of the temperance societies as they were the ones bearing the brunt of the consequences of the violence and family disruption caused by excessive use of alcohol and would vote for candidates pledged to control the use of alcohol. So the leaders in the Temperance movement became leaders in the fight for Women's Suffrage. So too, the proponents of the liquor industry became outspoken opponents of Women's suffrage.

**The 1891 petition**

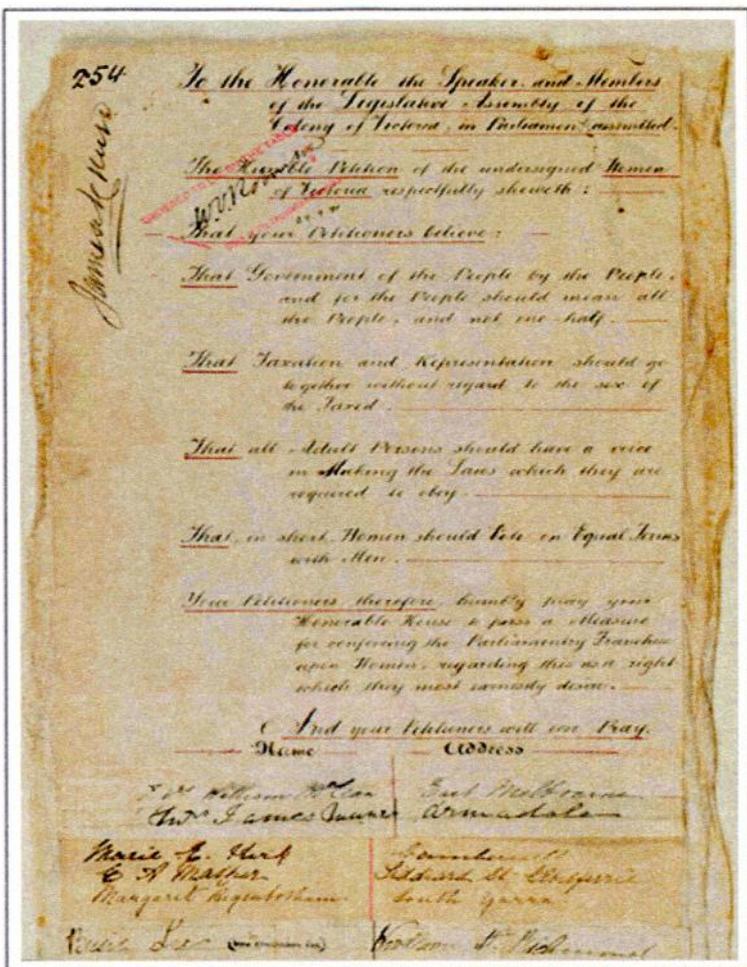
In 1891, James Munro was Premier of Victoria. His wife, Jane, supported women's suffrage. After a meeting on May 6<sup>th</sup>, 1891, at which James Munro met a delegation of women and a number of parliamentarians, he agreed to introduce legislation to give women the vote, if it could be shown that the women of Victoria did, indeed, support women's suffrage.

This was the trigger for an extraordinary event. The women's networks swung into action and on July 11, 1891 a petition was published and circulated throughout the State. Completed sheets were returned to Marie Kirk at the WCTU office in Melbourne where they were pasted onto cotton or linen fabric and assembled into a roll. The **Monster Petition**, as it is known, was created, consisting of more than 28,000 signatures and 260 metres long. On September 29<sup>th</sup>, 1891, the petition was presented to Parliament.

**The Orbost Connection**

57 Orbost women and one from Cann River signed the petition.

In Orbost, the *Snowy River Mail* had



been established in August, 1890 and it carried an interesting array of reports and comments on the Women's Suffrage movement in 1890-1891, so it may be concluded that, although remote from Melbourne, the women of Orbost were aware of the debate and were developing their opinions. As a number were property holders in their own right, it could be argued that they had a vested interest in gaining the right to vote.

The *Snowy River Mail* of May 9<sup>th</sup>, 1891 reports both the deputation to the Premier and the visit to Bairnsdale of Mrs Love, president of the Women's Temperance Union. Mr. Munro is reported as advocating extending the franchise to female ratepayers but advising "it would be unwise to press for more at present". Mrs Love was present at a social attended by over 200 persons and lectured for about 40 minutes. She also addressed a meeting of "Sunday scholars and their friends" at which there was standing room only and preached to a large congregation at the

Wesleyan Church, before traveling to speak to Swan Reach. It is probably safe to assume that reports of these special events and Mrs Love's message were relayed to Orbost, via relatives and friends as well as by other means such as city and local newspapers.

Thus, when, in July, 1891, the call went out to gather signatures for the petition, the women of the district, including those in Orbost, would have known what it was about and had their opinion on whether they wanted to support it or not.

## THE WOMAN'S PETITION.

To the Honorable the Speaker, and Members of the Legislative Assembly of the Colony of Victoria, in Parliament assembled

*The Humble Petition of the undersigned Women of Victoria respectfully sheweth:  
That your Petitioners believe:*

*That Government of the People by the People, and for the People should mean all the People, and not one-half.*

*That Taxation and Representation should go together without regard to the Sex of Taxed.*

*That all Adult Persons should have a voice in Making the Laws which they are required to obey.*

*That, in short, Women should Vote on Equal Terms with Men.*

*Your Petitioners, therefore, humbly pray your Honorable House to pass a Measure for conferring the Parliamentary Franchise upon Women, regarding this as a right which they most earnestly desire.*

*And your Petitioners will ever Pray.*

NAME

ADDRESS

The above is a Copy of the Woman's Petition, which is to be signed by at least 100,000 of the Women of Victoria To procure this number of Signatures all must help. Will you? Do not hesitate because you think you cannot get many names. Every few will help.

### DIRECTIONS.

(1). Copy The above Petition on white foolscap paper, and rule the sheet for name and address of persons signing as shewn. Rule blank sheets to follow as required.

(2). Obtain Signatures from Women only, and from none under 20 years of age. The object is to secure the names of Women who have reached, or who are just approaching Voting Age.

(3). Take Signatures on One Side of the Paper only.

(4). When ready send the Sheets to Mrs. Kirk, Sec. W.C.T.U., 28 Russell Street, Melbourne, to be attached to the Monster Petition. Do this not later than 20th August. Posted open at the ends, and without letter enclosed, they will come at the rate of 2oz. for 1d.

### NOTICE.

If desired, Printed Headings as above can be obtained. Literature upon the Woman's Suffrage Question can also be supplied. Apply to Mrs. Kirk, or to Mr. John Vale.

### **One Orbost Signatory: Kate Clark (nee Simpson) b 1865, d 1938 at age 73 years**

Kate, in many ways, is a typical example of young women who signed the petition. She was 26 years old when she signed the petition and was the mother of two little boys, one two and a half years and the other two months old. She had already experienced the death of a child, a daughter who only lived for seven days.

Kate (Catherine) was born in 1865 in Bonang, the fifth child and second daughter of Thomas Simpson and Mary Ann Standen.

Her father was born in Campbelltown, NSW, in 1822 and married Mary Ann Standen in Delegate in 1854. Mary Ann was born in 1823 in Salehurst, Sussex, England and came to Australia aboard the *Neptune* in 1838 at the age of sixteen. The family lived at Cabanandra where Thomas was a farmer.

Thomas and Mary Ann had six children, three boys and three girls, a relatively small family for

the times: Charles, (b1855); Emma Maria (b1859); Frederick (b 1860); Arthur James (b c1865); Catherine (b c1865); and Annie (b1868). It is possible that Kate was a twin as she was born in the same year as either her brother Arthur or sister Annie, depending on which source is used. She herself gave birth to two sets of twins. All Catherine's siblings lived in the area – Cabanandra, Delegate, Bombala, Bonang, Orbost - for most of their lives.

In 1887, Kate married Alfred Clark in St John's Church, Maffra. Alfred was a policeman and was the first Sargeant of Police in Orbost. It seems likely that the couple lived in Orbost after their marriage as their first son, Frederick, was born in 1888 in Orbost. In 1890, Kate gave birth to a daughter who lived for seven days. In 1891, a son Nathan was born, followed, in 1892, by the birth of twins, a boy and a girl who lived for ½ hr and 1½ hrs and were buried the same day. After this, Kate gave birth to a further eight children, including another set of twins. Reginald Arthur (b 1894) was baptized by Bishop JJ Melbourne in Orbost on March 11, 1894. One can imagine what a day that was for the young family.

By the time Olive May (b 1895 in Orbost) was baptized in October, 1896, Alfred's occupation is listed as Customs Officer. The border between NSW and Victoria was policed to prevent the smuggling of gold across the border to avoid tax. Alfred's duties may have been the reason for the family moving to Hayden's Bog, an area on the border between Bendoc and Delegate. All Kate's children were born in Bendoc after this: Eric Charles (b 1897); Edgar Bradley (b 1899); Annie Armstrong (b 1901); Albert Foster and Ila May (b 1904); and Douglas (b 1908). Alfred worked for a time around 1900 as a stock inspector and by 1905, his occupation is listed as farmer.

In 1901, when Kate was pregnant, her younger sister, Annie, died in childbirth at Cabanandra in August. Her daughter survived and was named Annie. So when Kate and Alfred's daughter was born in October, she was named Annie Armstrong, after Kate's sister.

The family moved to a property "Leura" at Toora around 1918 and at least some of her family lived there up until 1938. At Toora, Kate saw the deaths of Olive and Edgar at the ages of 23yrs and 19 yrs in 1919 and 1918 respectively – perhaps as the result of accidents. Her life was typical of the times in the bush – centred around the care of her large family and connecting with her mother and the families of her siblings as she raised her children. She endured the loss of siblings, both infant and grown children and her husband during her 73 years.

**Page 187 of the Petition has Kate's signature, together with 20 other signatures of women from Orbost and Newmerella.**



Kate first voted in an election in 1903 in the Division of Gippsland, Bendoc Polling Place. This must have been a Federal Election as women did not have the franchise in Victoria in 1903. She then voted regularly in elections, both Federal and State until her death in 1938 in Wonthaggi.

### **The Outcome of the Petition**

Premier James Munro withdrew the clause amending the legislation to allow the vote for women in order to get the "one vote, one value" clause passed.

It took another 17 years to get the legislation passed.

The petition is now one of the State's archival treasures and remains a monument to the dedicated work of those women who collected the signatures and a witness to the aspirations of those who signed their names.

### **Sources:**

Births, Deaths and Marriages:  
The Pioneers Register; The Edwardian Index;  
The Federation Index  
Church of England Baptism, Marriage and Funeral Register  
The Australian Electoral Rolls  
Far East Gippsland Pioneers Register Pre 1920  
1891 Petition website

### **CORRECTION:**

In Newsletter 84, *A tribute to Dave Paten*, we stated that Dave's mother Evelyn was the daughter of James Robertson, this district's earliest selector. Evelyn was in fact the sister of James Alexander Robertson, who took up land at Lochend /Newmerella in the 1870s.