

Miss Norma Male's wonderful Journey of her life 1916 - 2017

Eulogy written and delivered by her great Nephew Anthony Deal on Monday 9th October 2017.

My name is Anthony Deal. I'm the son of Max and Jeannette Deal. Max is Norma's nephew.

I welcome you all to this celebration of and thanksgiving for Norma's life.

Norma Thora Male was born in 1916 in Hughenden, Queensland to Henry James Male, then 28 years, and Louisa Ann Male (also known as Bluey), then 27 years. She was born a younger sibling to Altha (better known as Bunty) and was soon to have two younger brothers, Jim and Cliff, in that order. Cliff and Jim's wife, Marj, are with us today.

Norma's sister's name, Altha, and her first name were apparently characters in her mother's favourite (but forgotten) opera. Her middle name, Thora, was a source of some consternation to her and she never liked it. It is of course a tribute to the Norse god of thunder.

Norma's father was a postmaster and then Postal Inspector. The role required Norma's family to move several times. They moved from Hughenden to Maryborough, Prairie, Charters Towers. Norma reflected fondly of her youth in Queensland. She often told the story of the fun she would have making mud pies with her younger brothers, even when water was scarce.

Eventually Norma's family settled permanently in Cootamundra in 1933. In 1934 when Norma was 18, her father oversaw the first delivery of 17,000 letters via airmail along the 14 day "Imperial Route" from London to Australia via amongst other places, Cootamundra.¹

At the age of 18, Norma was employed by the Cootamundra Municipal Council as a grade C clerk, specialising in stenography. This was the start of a long and distinguished career in Local Government.

She continued working for Cootamundra Municipal Council through her early 20's and into the war years. During the war, that is from 1940 to 1944, she served in the Voluntary Aid Detachment, reaching the rank of quartermaster and looking after the "little dots" in the local chapter of Brownies, reaching the grand rank of "Brown Owl."

Not content with a clerical role and with the quiet support of a senior member of staff who recognised her potential, a Mr Louche, Norma studied and sat for the

¹ *The Argus* Melb Vic Monday 24 December 1934 "First Airmail – 14 days from England"

public service examination in two parts in 1942 and 1943. In doing so, she shortened the standard time taken to study and sit the exams by half. She qualified as a town clerk in 1944.

That same year, at the age of 28, she applied for and obtained the position of Balranald Municipal Council Town clerk.

This, in itself, was history. She was the first female town clerk permanently appointed in Australia and news of the appointment was published far wide and wide – from Townsville to Melbourne and from Sydney to Balranald.

The Cootamundra Herald proudly announced the appointment on September 1944 under the headline:

“MISS MALE to be Balranald’s Town Clerk – First lady town clerk in NSW”

The paper reported:

“Miss Male, though so modest herself about it, has been a social – as well as a scholastic – success. She plays the piano and violin and recites and will be greatly missed by various bodies...”

Mayor Stratton, is quoted as saying at Norma’s farewell:

“The aldermen and staff ...farewell Miss Male who has been a brilliant member of the staff for years...and is now honoured with the appointment to the position of town clerk for Balranald...Cootamundra is proud to see her attaining distinction. She has worked hard for it. She is a girl with personality and great tact, who has filled an important place on our staff.”

Similar praise flowed from other aldermen and heads of staff and Norma replied with customary graciousness.

At age 28 she left Cootamundra for Balranald with 25 pounds for travel and moving costs, a wallet presented by Cootamundra Municipal Council and a suit case.

Norma had never visited Balranald and her journey there had something of the air of Burke & Wills about it. In fact that pair had passed through Balranald in 1860.

For 12 hours she rode the mail coach a distance of 131 kms from Hay to Balranald during one of the worst droughts in the district’s history. In her words:

“I had to open every one of the 46 gates on the way, helped service the [lorry’s] producer-gas unit every 12 miles and we finally had to be towed the last leg of the trip because of a broken axle.”

She finally arrived Balranald at midnight. After finding refuge in one of the five hotels, she said she expected to see “Hopalong Cassidy” ride around the next corner. She is quoted as saying:

“I thought I had come to the end of the world and I said to myself, “My God Norma, what have you done.”²

No doubt similar thoughts entered her mind when she first laid eyes on her municipal office which comprised a “*small room in the corner of the courthouse equipped with a table, two chairs and a safe.*” Council personnel numbers were similarly meagre; being two men and a dray horse called Kate.

After 4 years in the role, she made Sydney papers again under the headline “*Woman Clerk in Love with her job*”³ which described her as having “*won a State wide reputation as an efficient and tactful administrator*”.

The Sydney Morning Herald goes on to describe her as having a “*smiling face, a shock of light golden hair and a petite figure in a trim suit surmounted by a rakish brown hat.*”

In another Sydney paper in 1949⁴, under the heading “*A woman runs the town*” the paper reported:

“For five years (Miss Male) has capably filled the post (of town clerk) for Balranald. To the 1250 residents she is an outstanding figure; in addition to being an attractive-to-look-at town clerk she has a reputation throughout the state for her 100 per cent efficient administration in local government affairs.”

Norma was rightly proud of her achievements in her 30 years in office; not only on a day to day basis but in advancing community services in the Municipality and then the much larger Shire.

In 1947, not long after she took up the role of town clerk, she presided over the opening of the Balranald Library.⁵

The floods of 1950, 1952 and 1956 also proved testing but Norma sailed through with aplomb. She told the story that during one major flood she manned the levy banks; directing operations and filling sandbags side by side with other locals well into the early hours of one Saturday morning. She turned up later that day to continue the work only to find the levy banks deserted; the waters were still rising, but the locals had opted to leave the bagging work to cheer on the local football team at the Saturday grand final.

² Article “Shire Bids farewell to top officer”

³ The Sydney Morning Herald, Thursday 21 October 1948

⁴ The World’s News Sydney Saturday 15 January 1949 p 21

⁵ The Riverine Grazier Hay, NSW Friday 27 June 1947

In 1956, in the face of great opposition from local graziers she successfully drew the plans for and implemented the formation of the much larger Shire of Balranald. This amalgamated the Pastoral Protection Board District of Balranald with the Municipality of Balranald which then joined the Western Division of Shires.

She was instrumental in establishing the Western Division dental Health Scheme and served as its Secretary. The Scheme delivered dental care to those people in remote areas and covered seven shires and crossed over into Victoria.

She was also responsible for establishing the regional baby health centre which allowed registered sisters to visit mothers in their remote outback homes.

Norma continued to work in the role of Shire Clerk of Balranald from 1956 until she retired in 1974 – in all, she served in Local Government for a period of 30 years.

At the time of her retirement she was honoured with a testimonial dinner attended by 200 people including various State and Local Government ministers and undersecretaries.

The Sentinel reported that:

“The dinner ...was attended by some 200 guests with a representation that itself was remarkable tribute to any person...”

Most speakers claimed Miss Male as a friend of long standing, stressing her helpfulness to them in their official positions and generosity to people who needed her help or advice over the years.”

At that dinner, Sister Pat Chaston, the Balranald Health Care Sister said:

“During my time as...Sister and especially those first few terrifying months...it was knowing that I could go to Norma with whatever problem... whether it be a difficult head office, a tiresome Riverina Health District... a radiator wrapped around a fan belt...a kangaroo having failed to give way to the right...one knew Norma had a finger on the pulse of things...and all would be well. I could go on and on but I feel suffice is to say I remember in my list of duties left for Dawn I said:

“ANY PROBLEMS GO TO MISS MALE. IF NOT AVAILABLE, CARRY PROBLEM TILL SHE IS!!”

The Honourable CB Fuller MP, then NSW Deputy Premier and Minister for Local Government, wrote to Norma commending her for her dedication and service on the occasion of her retirement. In the letter, he noted the difficulties she overcame when she first started in the role and noted that: *“in 1956, (her) outstanding drive and organisation abilities contributed materially to saving the town of Balranald from almost certain flooding.”*

He noted her key role in the formation of the new Shire of Balranald, the Western Shires Dental Health Service and the Balranald Baby Health and Library services as well as her work in the CWA, the Far West Children's Health Scheme and the welfare of aboriginal people in the Balranald area.

He concluded with these words:

"These are only a few of the many welfare and community activities you have undertaken but they provide ample evidence of your varied interests in the district. They are representative of you as a person of unselfish endeavours truly dedicated to the service and advancement of the community in which you reside...."

"That you have established this reputation in holding a senior position in local government which formerly was regarded almost as a male preserve, and that you have managed to combine efficiency with a true feminine graciousness is all the more to your credit."

At the time she retired Norma oversaw a staff of 25 people. She had successfully introduced dental and baby health care services, had played key role in the formation of the new shire and played an active role in the welfare of local people. Council administration was no longer carried out from a small room in the corner of the Court House but from modern offices.

During her time in Balranald, Norma forged strong lasting friendships both socially and with her colleagues. I am pleased to say that members of her staff including Rob McMillan, continued to keep in contact with Norma and some are here today; which I think is testament to the esteem in which she was held.

In recognition for her years of dedicated service to local government, Norma was awarded the British Empire Medal in 1975. She is a member of the National Pioneer Women's Hall of Fame as a Leader of Men and has been honoured by the renaming in 2009 of Balranald Council Chambers as Normal Male Chambers.

Norma has always filled her life with work, family and friends. No one can doubt that her social life was rich.

In 1946 she was elected inaugural Treasurer of the Balranald branch of the CWA along with President and soon to be life long friend Mrs Grace McIntyre.⁶

Grant and Grace McIntyre were the centre of her social scene in Balranald over the next 25 years. My father, Max Deal, has very many happy memories of spending holidays with his favourite Aunt and learning how to farm on Grant and Grace McIntyre's property.

⁶ The Riverina Grazier Tuesday 31 December 1946 p 2

In the 1960's with the opening up of the Kangaroo route to the jet airplane, Norma took to travelling and continued to travel the world until she was 88.

She has travelled to the US, to Canada, Japan, Brunei, Singapore, the UK and most countries in Europe. I am sure I have left some countries out but that's not important: she's been everywhere and Norma took delight in easily engaging with different people on her travels.

She has chatted over a light lunch with the Director of the Louvre and National Museums, had her hand kissed by the French Foreign Minister in a Norman Chateau and taken tea with the Queen in Buckingham Palace.

On retirement in 1974 Norma moved to Elizabeth Bay where while working part time for the Local Government Association for 14 years, she made a wide circle of friends through Probis and regularly attended solo card sessions at which she'd report her winnings of 10 or even 25 cents if she had a good run. She moved to Watermark in Wagga Wagga in 2008 where she once again made strong friendships and continued her love of cards until she was 100, playing regularly with the Trumpets at Watermark.

Norma never married. Like so many people, she lost her love, Peter, in the War. Even so, Norma was not without her suitors who continued to pursue her well into her 80's. Sometimes I would ask her "Why not? Old Sid has been keen for 25 years and there's that wealthy retired farmer who's also pretty keen."

She'd shudder and reply "*Good God no. One wants me to move to a farm in Western Australia and the other just wants me to wash and iron his shirts and underwear. I'm not doing either of those things.*"

In all, Norma lived a remarkable life. She possessed a formidable but unassuming intelligence and her views were always expressed tactfully and with respect. She had an easy grace about her and possessed a quiet dignity. She was generous with her time and was always quick of wit and ready to laugh, particularly if there were a piano and a scotch handy.

As a town clerk, she was calm, practical and resourceful and led by example. Capability and fairness, but not gender, were things that mattered to her.

As a friend, she was always measured, thoughtful, loyal and fair to a fault.

As an Aunt she loved and spoilt her nieces and nephews and our children. She was a strong determined woman, whose indomitable spirit naturally placed her as matriarch of our family.

In her 101 years she touched so many lives and made such a difference to so many people that her passing has left a void. We are all the richer for knowing and living part of our lives with such a remarkable person. We will miss her.