



Jan Rae in the 1940s (courtesy Jan's niece Jeannette Rae)

Mary Jeannette (Jan) Rae (1920-2016) was born 19 May 1920 in Montclair, New Jersey, USA. Jan's parents were Melbourne-born Harvey George (1889-1968) and Fremantle-born Ethel Jeannette (nee Stirling 1890-1952) Rae. Harvey was an accountant, living with his well-to-do parents at *Raeburn* on the north-east corner of Bay and Riley Roads in Claremont when he enlisted for First World War (1914-1918) service in October of 1914. He voyaged to fight at Gallipoli, but after being shot at Gaba Tepe (Anzac Cove) on 25 April 1915, his left arm was amputated at the shoulder, and he returned to WA (at his own expense!) in September 1915. Harvey Rae and 'Nettie' Stirling, who had met as neighbours, were married at the Anglican Church Claremont in December 1915, and it was noted that they intended to move to England early in the new year, as he had previously secured a work position there when invalided to hospital.

The couple had children Malcolm Harvey b. London 1916, Jan b.1920, George Campbell b. Perth 1922, and Ross Lewis Coombe b. Perth 1926. The birth of Jan in the USA is explained by correspondence to and from Harvey Rae in 1920 that was addressed to George Wills & Sons Ltd, at 206 Broadway, New York. Harvey was working there as an accountant - the company had a head office in London, with branches in the USA and throughout Australia. The family returned to Western Australia in 1922, and Jan attended Perth Girls School 1933-1935. Harvey Rae hoped that Jan would follow him into accountancy, but eventually agreed to finance her articles with the emerging architect-businessman Harold Krantz (1906-1999) from 3 March 1937.

Jan was listed in the 'Tee Square Journal' as a member of the Architectural Association of WA in 1937-1938. In the catalogue for Tenth Annual Architectural Exhibition of the Royal Institute of Architects of Western Australia (1940), it was noted that she had won third prize in the competition for design of a house to cost not more than £1 000. Jan was the secretary of the Architectural Students' Association in 1940, selling tickets for the T-Square Ball. Other members of the committee responsible for the highly-anticipated event at the Embassy ballroom included W.A. (Bill) Durack, Marie Jackson, Marjorie Boas, J.W. (Bill) Hawkins and Basil Berry.

Jan was learning 'on the job' and also attending night classes at Perth Technical College, up until 1941 when she joined the Public Works Department (PWD) as a draftsman. She noted that she was 'very reluctantly' accepted by PWD Principal Architect Albert 'Paddy' Clare, 'for being a female, and left-handed at that!' - although Clare had in 1937 admitted the tenacious Margaret Feilman (1921-2013) to architectural cadetship with the PWD.



Jan Rae at enlistment in 1942, and in uniform c.1944 (NAA A9300; courtesy Jeannette Rae)

Jan Rae was 21 years old at her enlistment as an airwoman in the Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force (WAAAF) in March 1942; at this time she was living with her parents at 1 Thompson Road, Claremont. The largest of the Second World War (1939-1945) women's services, the WAAAF was formed in March 1941 after considerable lobbying by women keen to serve. Other females involved in the WA architectural profession that served during the war included Nancy Allen, Zoie Bennett, Marjorie Boas, Judith Brisbane, Marie Jackson, and Vida Wright.



The official party at the T-Square Ball in 1944: back row Commander V.L. Vinden, Corporal John D. Mercer, Lieutenant-Governor Sir James Mitchell; front Lady Mitchell and Section Officer Jan Rae (courtesy Jan's niece Jeannette Rae, published in *Western Mail*, 13 July 1944, p.11).

Despite a promising increase in the number of women entering the profession in WA in the 1930s, with the disruption of the war hindering the potential studies of both men and women, just six females were registered as architects in Western Australia in the first half of the Twentieth Century: Margaret Pitt Morison (1924, no.102 & 1929, no.129), Nancy Allen (1932, no.138), Dorothea Hancock (1932, no.139); Zoie Bennett (1933, no.142), Margaret Feilman (1945, no.176), and Marie Jackson (1949, no. 200).

Jan worked on an interesting Government Chemical Laboratories project at the PWD before she departed to join the WAAAF in 1942, having only partly-completed the Architects Board of Western Australia final examination. By then she had been attending first aid and motor mechanics instruction classes held by the Red Cross for volunteers, and thus was able to join the WAAAF as a DMT - Driver Motor Transport. The driving, initially at Geraldton RAAF Base, ended in a year, and by 1943 she became a commissioned officer in Melbourne with the Works Branch - working in both Victoria and WA on RAAF installations such as camp buildings and radar stations. The war service enabled Jan to continue her architectural education under the Post War Reconstruction Training Scheme. Jan decided to enroll in a course at Melbourne, a city which she had become fond of during the war. Leaving the WAAAF at the end of 1945, under the specially-tailored arrangements for ex-service persons she commenced a joint matriculation and first year architecture course at the Melbourne Institute of Technology (MIT) in 1946 - undertaking matric subjects at night, and architecture studies by day.

In a 1991 letter to Curtin University architectural student Leonie Matthews for the ground-breaking dissertation 'An Exploratory study of Women in Western Australian Architecture 1920-1960', Jan noted of her time at Melbourne in the late 1940s: "*On free nights there were regular waitressing jobs, to buy essential extras over & above the training allowance, to be able to live & enjoy things available in Melbourne like ballet & concerts & seeing a bit of the State of Victoria & paying the rent of the same self-contained roomette I occupied over almost all my six years in Melbourne - a little haven facing east & a distant view of the Melbourne Botanical Gardens just opposite, off St Kilda Road, well within walking distance of the City and Tech, the Library and Art Gallery ...*" Whilst in Melbourne, Jan received the sad news of the death of her 25 year old younger brother George at the Claremont Mental Hospital in 1948. A cadet X-Ray technician, George had enlisted for war service in 1942, and was discharged as medically unfit in 1944.

For the second half of the course in Melbourne, once students had graduated from MIT with a Diploma in Architecture, they were able to join the architectural degree course at the University of Melbourne for the fourth and fifth years, meeting the Uni students who had been doing the more academic first three years while the Tech students did a more practical course. Jan thought that "*It was a very exciting time to start at the Uni then, as the old Atelier system was just changing over to the Degree Course with a brand new Prof and senior lecturers like Roy Grounds & Robin Boyd just joining the staff as we all melded together, about one third of the intake being ex-service people quite a few years older than the younger ones who had started the course straight from school.*"

After graduating with her Bachelor of Architecture in 1951, Jan returned to Perth briefly and was registered (no.227) with the Architects Board of WA, just the eighth female to do so in the State. She joined the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (RAIA) as an Associate in 1951, but soon departed for a working holiday in England in 1952, joining Melbourne friends living in London. Jan found that architectural work was difficult to find, but secured valuable experience working at places like the BBC and Shell-Mex in typing 'pools', as well as in small legal firms and offices. She travelled home to Perth at the end of 1952 hoping to be in time, but failing to see her dying, and adored, mother 'Nettie'. Jan then stayed in Perth working on several interesting jobs, including the South Perth

Community Hospital with Bob Blatchford, then with Nancy Allen at WG Bennett and Associates on a variety of projects. In 1954 Jan was living at 77 Redfern Street in Subiaco, and in 1956 at Flat 411, 138 Adelaide Terrace Perth.



Jan Rae in the 1950s (courtesy Jeannette Rae; Peta Reid)

Following up an interest in town planning inspired by a fourth year project for Prahran in Melbourne, Jan took up a position at Fremantle working for Town Clerk Noel McCombe under the guidance of planning consultant Harold Boas. But after a year or two it was obvious to Jan that the frustrations of town planning were not for her, *“as one could never see the end result of ones efforts - the vision and the vested interests seemed always opposed”*. From there she worked for a short period on projects with Cameron Chisholm & Nicol – *“when the latter [Gil Nicol] was the inspired very young & able junior partner & my fellow slaves Stuart Coll and Stewart Coombes [sic – Combs]”*. In 1956 Jan designed the simple residence at 7 Stephanie Street Dalkeith for her brother Ross’ family, built so that an extension could be added for her father.



Residence for Ross Rae family at 7 Stephanie Street Dalkeith, shortly after completion in 1957 (Jeannette Rae)



Jan Rae and Walter (Mik) Besser were married at Perth in 1956 (courtesy Peta Reid)

Jan met and married Walter (Mik) Besser at Perth in 1956. Besser had been an assistant to the engineer at Fremantle Council, but was by then working in Townsville in North Queensland - where the couple moved to and lived for 13 years. Almost immediately on arrival there in 1957 Jan worked for the town's leading architects Lund Hutton & Newell on a variety of jobs until a son was born in April 1958, then a daughter in 1960, and another son in 1962. In between, Jan was managing to do relief work for the Townsville Council architect, '*several private houses drawing in the peace of the night, as well as our own innovative homes - a mirror image pair, shared by my husband's parents who'd arrived from UK to retire*'. By 1963 the family was at 17 Fantome Street, Rowes Bay, and the other private residences Jan designed may have been at Pallarenda, also in Townsville. Jan's daughter Peta notes that '*the homes were ahead of their time, light and airy and open plan*'. Mary Jeanette Besser was registered (no. 670) with the Board of Architects in Queensland in 1964.



Jan in 1960 with son and daughter; 17 Fantome Street, Rowes Bay (courtesy Peta Reid)

The Bessers decided to move to a cooler climate in 1970, knowing that there was work available in Newcastle, NSW. In 1974 they were at 27 Hebburn Street, Hamilton, Newcastle. With the children at schools nearby and a child-minder afterwards until 5.30pm, Jan worked 1970-1976 with the busy firm of Thelander and Associates Architects on a variety of jobs which included bowling and RSL clubs around country areas, interesting houses for people who could afford the luxury, and team work in the office on schools for the PWD. When the practice had to almost fold as building activity declined in 1976, she joined a building consultant who had contacts for work but not the professional staff to service them. Jan worked almost solo on the design and documentation, dealing directly with the clients to produce squash clubs, small factories, houses and office buildings. In between times she was also able to undertake the design of homes for several friends. Her most satisfying project was a shopping arcade worth around \$1 million at East Maitland, about 20 kms north-west of Newcastle.

Jan noted that the arcade was for 'a most appreciative and cooperative client, a close knit family group of retailers'. This was to be almost the final work of her architectural career - as the recession of 1982 found Jan out of work and two weeks later, her husband also, so they both retired at the ages of 62. They had by then commenced work on a project for their retirement, having purchased a fine old Victorian free-standing brick terrace house in the harbourside suburb of Carrington alongside the port at Newcastle. After eight years of living in the 'terrace', they decided to move to more easily managed accommodation, and bought a smaller house at 5 Braid Road, Fern Bay in NSW where gardening, cooking, and relaxing enlivened retirement years.

Jan noted to Leonie Matthews in 1991 that '*almost without exception I have not found over the years any particular antipathy to women architects, either during training or out in the world afterwards. Of course, one learns to ignore sexist remarks made by the ignorant, & jests, very early in the piece, but, within the profession & trade apart from perhaps, some petty jealousy which would surface occasionally I seemed to be treated as an individual, doing a job to the best of one's ability - male architects I found to be generally much more ambitious than I was personally & could jump over one to reach the top but they were the exception when it came to working together in a common cause such as being*

on the job together. ... But out on the job I've always felt equal & at ease and enjoyed the work for its own sake. You'll no doubt have come across Margaret Feilman who was at the top of the tree in many respects & while not quite my age, or almost contemporary, but I never did share her view that one had to be better at the business of being an architect than the men just to prove a point - Guess it just wasn't my nature - too easy going by far'.

Jan passed away 11 October 2016 in Newcastle, aged 96 years.



Jan pictured at her 90th birthday in 2010 (courtesy Peta Reid)

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Pers. comm. nephew Harvey Rae, niece Jeannette Rae, daughter Peta Reid, November 2022.

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Heritage Committee meeting approval date: 15 Dec 2022 Last updated: 15 Dec 2022

Citation details:

Taylor, Dr John J., 'Mary Jeannette (Jan) Rae-Besser (1920-2016)', Western Australian Architect Biographies, <http://www.taylorarchitects.com.au/Biographies.html> accessed DATE.