

**PRIZE FOR YOUNG ARCHITECT**



Mr. E. J. Whitaker, an architecture student at the Perth Technical College, receives congratulations from Miss V. J. Wright, the only woman student on the course, after he had been presented with technical books worth £10/10/, a prize for being the student to show greatest progress throughout his training. The prize was presented to him yesterday afternoon by the Director of Education (Mr. Murray Little).

Vida Wright congratulates Ed Whitaker on his receiving the WG Bennett prize, with Bill Angove, Gres Cohen and Eddie McMillan also looking on (*The West Australian*, 16 Sep 1949, p.17)

**Vida Jean Wright** (1915-2005) was born 18 December 1915 in Fremantle, the second child of Henry Bertram (1884-1948) and Muriel Ursula (nee Hicks) Wright (1886-1952), who had married at Fremantle in October 1912. Muriel was a nurse and Henry a lithographer. Vida's elder sister Dulcie Muriel was born at George Street South Fremantle in 1914, and younger brother Hilton Harvey was born in 1918. The Wright family moved to live in Melbourne from 1920 until 1929, when Henry (Bert) Wright lost his job with the onset of the Great Depression.

At this time Vida and Dulcie were finishing school, but there was no employment available to Bert in Victoria. Muriel's family saw an opportunity, and asked if the Wrights would consider returning to Western Australia, as Vida's elderly grandfather James Albert Hicks was living in Fremantle, and needed someone to care for him. Hicks was still running a printing works, and was also a real estate agent. Soon based in Fremantle again, Bert Wright took over the printing of Hicks' small weekly newspaper, the *Sentinel*. With ongoing economic hardship, from 1932 to 1939 Vida and her sister worked in the J.A. Hicks & Co family drapery business at Kalgoorlie. The death of their 20 year old brother Hilton, drowned at Esperance on Good Friday 1939, and the commencement of the Second World War (1939-1945) were traumatic events of this time.

Vida's Kalgoorlie boyfriend William Philipppson joined the Ninth Division of the Second Australian Imperial Force in 1940, and left for service in the Middle East. Vida moved back to 26 Ord Street Fremantle with her mother and father, working in the office of Caris Brothers Jewellers before her own enlistment in the Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force (WAAAF) in September 1942, at 26 years of age. 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 Jan Rae.

Vida trained as a radar operator at Richmond in New South Wales, before being posted to Geraldton for around eighteen months, where she met pioneering female architect Margaret Pitt Morison, working as a Camouflage Officer. Vida was subsequently posted to Maryborough in Queensland, but her Filter Officers' course was cancelled, and she returned to work at the Mount Lawley radar station in Perth. Following his return to Australia, Bill Philipppson and Vida became engaged in March 1943, but he was killed in action at New Guinea during September 1943, hence buried at the Lae War Cemetery. From 1944 to 1946 Vida worked with the Army stores depot, assisting with installing a new system around Australia. Discharged from the WAAAF in July 1946, and always having had an interest in building, Vida chose to take advantage of the Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme to enter Perth Technical College (PTC).

The PTC architectural course commenced in 1946 under W.H. (Bill) Robertson. Robertson did not accept Vida at first, which only made her more determined to succeed, engaging PTC's administration with the back-up of a supportive air force officer. She undertook one year of the drafting course before permitted entry into architecture, and still had to complete matriculation subjects in addition, as for all the other students who had only achieved a 'junior' high school level prior. It appears that Vida was the first female admitted into architecture at PTC. Examination results published in *The West Australian* newspaper indicate that she studied architecture from 1949 to 1953, but did not complete the course.

Vida's sister Dulcie had married Arthur Vance Boyland at Fremantle in 1940, and in 1942 Dulcie was living at 18 Taylor Road Nedlands. Bert Wright died in 1948

at Taylor Road, and Muriel Wright died in 1952 at 60 Walcott Street, Mount Lawley. Vida's brother-in-law Arthur died at Taylor Road in August 1953, aged just 44 – with Dulcie he had two children, Vida's nieces Dorothy and Marjorie. With both her parents and then Arthur dying while Vida was studying, and the need to assist her sister, it is not surprising she did not finish her studies and achieve subsequent registration at this time.

Vida noted that at PTC she *'had very few friends in the class. They were all men. I was the only woman. There was one girl did start with me, she was younger than I was. I don't remember her name. She was only there for a couple of months. She decided that it wasn't for her.* [Note: Vida is likely to be referring to Dorothy Sadler, whose exam results are listed 1950-1951. 'Dot' married fellow student Jack Finney in 1952, and did not complete the course]. *So the rest of the time I was very much on my own. As I say a lot of the boys were younger than I was. Apart from which I had such a heavy work load, I really didn't have any time for a social life'.*



Nearly 34 year old Vida Wright amongst fellow PTC students in 1949. Vida and some others in the early PTC intake were studying under the Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme following Second World War service, and thus older in age. The greater number of the students entered PTC from school, such as Ed Whitaker, born in 1928 (photo courtesy Claire Whitaker; names confirmed by Fred Warren, Bill Weedon, Gus Ferguson, Tony Brand).

Vida worked from 1953 to 1964 at architects Oldham Boas & Ednie-Brown, initially in the former AMP building on the corner of St George's Terrace and

William Streets in Perth, and then at offices in West Perth. Amongst many varied projects, she documented some of the Alcoa Company's developments, with one of the partners, Syd Musto, the architect-in-charge. At Oldham Boas, Vida became interested in Town Planning, as Harold Boas (1883–1980) was one of the State's first town planners, and Peter Arney (1927-1996), another partner in the firm, was also very interested in town planning. Vida produced a highly-commended, but unsuccessful competition scheme for the Commonwealth Games village.

From 1964 to 1968 Vida worked at the office of architects Parry & Rosenthal, where she found the architectural work more interesting. It was a smaller office and she soon designed a large residence near the RAAF Pearce airbase. The clients were from the north-west of WA, where they had a station. Mervyn Parry (1913-2006) was the architect-in-charge, and Vida also did a lot of the work on a Bunning family house in Peppermint Grove in this time. Not having completed her final studies in the PTC architecture course, and after working as a draftsman for many years, Vida finally completed her training to qualify as an architect, and in 1965 registered with the Architects Board of Western Australia (no 472) at 50 years of age. She then became aware of the commencement of a post-graduate town planning course at PTC, three years part time, and Vida was in the first group that qualified as town planners in WA.

Vida left Parry & Rosenthal, determined to obtain a town planning appointment. She applied for a position that was advertised at the Perth City Council, but didn't get the job. Then she applied for another at Melville, and didn't get that one either. Eventually there was a position advertised for a planning assistant at Stirling, close to where Vida lived. She thought that would be a good way to obtain experience with local government town planning, and took on the lesser role. Twelve months later a more senior position at the Shire of Wanneroo was advertised, which was one that she really coveted. Vida had an interview with the full council, and they were impressed with her extensive qualifications. She was appointed the Shire of Wanneroo Shire Planner in August 1969, making her the first female Shire Planner in local government in Australia. Vida was 53 years of age when she commenced, the first of the professional staff at Wanneroo.

The first job she had was to produce the town planning scheme for the Wanneroo area. There was little in the way of existing mapping available, and suddenly the staff were confronted with an enormous population increase in the area, with a consequent rapid rate of development. In a 1991 conversation with Curtin University architectural student Leonie Matthews for the ground-breaking dissertation 'An Exploratory study of Women in Western Australian Architecture 1920-1960', Vida noted:

*'So we got extra staff. You got extra equipment and you did the best you could. In the course of the time I was there I did several town planning schemes. What we called guided development schemes. At one stage we were doing I would say 40% of all development that was going on in the metropolitan area. The other councils shared the rest. It really did develop at an enormous rate. Also while I was there the study for the Joondalup centre was one of the major things. That is still developing and the north west corridor plan. This is beside all the private subdivision that went on.'*

*'Later on also, we felt the need for industry because as the population increased we needed an industrial area. Particularly a light industrial area. A piece of land was purchased by the Council for an industrial area on the eastern side of Wanneroo Road. I did the subdivision plan for that. It became Wangara. We named it for the two roads. Wanneroo and Gnangara. The Council sold the land and used the money to build its present offices at Joondalup. The other side of the lake. The council offices became the first office, or the first building in Joondalup.'*

Planning for the City of Joondalup, the Wangara industrial zone, the Whitfords precinct and many other areas originated during Vida's term of office at Wanneroo. She worked there very happily and productively for eleven years before retirement in 1980. In 1991 Vida was living at 11 Bailey Street in Trigg.

Vida studied architecture and town planning in a time when women were rarely seen in these professions, and at PTC she was the first female studying within the exciting post-war development of institutional architectural education in Western Australia. Vida became an Associate of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects in 1966, and a Fellow in 1978. She passed away 30 July 2005 at 89 years of age. Her sister Dulcie Boyland had died in 1970, aged 56 years.

References:

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