

a centenary of canberra's catholics

In the eighth in a series of portraits of significant Catholics of the national capital, 2009 Canberra Citizen of the Year Bishop Pat Power remembers Ursula Southwell.

Ursula gave voice to best of 'bush capital'

It was rather exceptional for a woman to be heard in command of the air waves. Ursula was one of the first female radio announcers in Australia.

Listeners to ABC Radio 666 in Canberra think nothing of the fact that three of the four radio hosts are female. But when Ursula Southwell performed such duties from 1942 to 1946 for what was then 2CY it was rather exceptional for a woman to be heard in command of the air waves. Ursula was one of the first female radio announcers in Australia.

Ursula Lynch was one of nine children born in Sydney where she attended St Vincent's College, Potts Point. This afforded her the opportunity to study French, Latin, German and some Russian. After school she completed a steno/secretarial course which enabled her to work for the ABC in Sydney with Radio Australia shortwave broadcasting.

When Ursula was transferred to Canberra in 1942, the ABC occupied a small studio in the Melbourne Building in London Circuit, Civic, above what is now the Charcoal Grill Restaurant. She boarded at the Hotel Civic and had a phone in her room (rather unusual in those days) in case an urgent broadcast had to be made from Canberra.

A fascinating interview with Ursula conducted by Rod Quinn on ABC 666 on 8 May, 1995, can be accessed at www.tinyurl.com/6h3yteq. She recalled how 2CY was effectively a regional ABC station, taking most of its programs from 2FC and 2BL in Sydney.

However, being the war years it played a big role in recording messages from Australia's parliamentary leaders. Care had to be taken even in the selection of music lest a particular song or tune be substituted and played as a signal to the enemy.

In the course of her work, Ursula recorded messages from Prime Ministers Menzies, Fadden, Curtin and Chifley. She shared with Rod Quinn the pride and joy in recording other notables such as chairman of the BBC Lord Reith, general manager of the ABC Sir Charles Moses and Governor-General the Duke of Gloucester.

Clearly the highlight of her career up to that point was the end of the war when there was dancing in the street in Civic on VE Day.

Ursula described Canberra in 1945 as a lovely country town and to the end of her days she saw Canberra as the "bush capital".

She told the story of how her fiancé, Malcolm George (Mack) Southwell, was driving a mob of sheep through Civic.

He paused and let them graze for a while on City Hill as he visited Ursula in the ABC office on London Circuit for morning tea.



Keeping control of the mob of sheep was no difficulty as Mack simply whistled orders to the sheep dogs from the open window of the upstairs office.

Ursula and Mack were married in 1947. Mack was part of a pioneering family of the Canberra region with connections to both St Ninian's Presbyterian Church and the St John's Anglican Church.

He converted to Catholicism and played an active part in the St Vincent de Paul Society as well as participating in many community services.

Mack and Ursula lived the first eight years of their marriage at "Rosevale" Barton Highway, Ainslie as it was then designated. Their home once stood where the North Lyneham shops are now located. Their first two children, Jane and John, were born while there. In the mid-1950s, Mack drew a soldier settler's block of land further out past Hall. Two more children, Robert and Simon, were added to the family at "Ginnagulla".

Ursula continued to maintain her contact with social and church groups in Canberra.

On one occasion she was loading up the car with trays of lamingtons and cream cakes. Having all the trays placed across the seat of the old Plymouth car, she quickly went back inside the house to collect her handbag before setting off for town.

On her return to the car, she was greeted by "Tibby" the black pony displaying a snout white with icing sugar, cream and coconut and not a cake to be seen!

Ursula Southwell was a person of deep faith which expressed itself in personal and family prayer and a deep commitment to making the world a bet-

ter place. This was part of her motivation in the Catholic Women's League.

She was the first archdiocesan president of the CWL serving from 1954 to 1956. Her big aim was to have the league spread outside Canberra. At the end of her term in 1956, the CWL had grown to five branches with 362 members.

In 1960-61 she filled the position of national vice-president during the period that Jean Reid was national president.

In 1968, Ursula's media skills were called on when she was appointed publicity officer. In 1974, she lobbied vigorously in a campaign to raise standards in the mass media.

Perhaps sensitised by her study of other languages, Ursula had a particular passion for assisting European migrants and their families.

This resulted in numerous picnics being held at "Ginnagulla" with migrants and their families joining in celebrating the Australian bush with barbeques, games, fun and laughter.

She was part of the establishment of Daramalan College, playing a key role in the annual college art exhibition, which proved to be a significant fund-raising activity.

Following Mack's death in 1975, Ursula came to live in Belconnen taking part in parish and community life as well as supporting her adult children and their families.

She continued to drive almost to the end of her life. There is a youthful vibrancy in her voice in her 1995 interview with Rod Quinn and Ursula remained young at heart right up to her death on 1 September, 2004.

Ursula Southwell would have loved to have been part of Canberra's centenary celebrations as she epitomised the best of the spirit of Canberra.



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