

WOMEN AND WATER

SA WATER - CELEBRATING 150 YEARS

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The role of women in the early years of building South Australia's water supply was largely overlooked. As a general rule women were not able to retain their employment after marriage and senior positions were rarely offered to them. In addition, women were not eligible for superannuation and were obliged to retire earlier than men. Women were also paid much less than men as their work was considered to be simply 'filling in time' and of less importance than the work of men.

The earliest record of a woman employee of the Waterworks and Drainage Commission is in 1905. It is thought she was the wife of a riverboat skipper, and she received two shillings and sixpence a week for recording the river levels at Overland Corner on the River Murray.

By 1922 three women gained permanent employment as stenographer-typists at the Kent Town waterworks. The women were paid a wage of 50 shillings a week, even though the minimum wage for men was 68 shillings per week.

The women who played a vital role in the development of the State's water supply include those who cooked for squads of single men employed on large construction sites. When large engineering projects were undertaken such as building dams, reservoirs, pipelines and installing drainage and irrigation schemes, the men employed on them often had to live in camps. Married men were usually accompanied by their wives, but caterers were employed to look after the single men. These women lived in small tents and huts, working from 4am until midnight seven days a week.

During the Second World War when there was a shortage of labour, more women were employed as office workers and some were given supervisors roles.

The unpaid work of women continued over the years. While the men of our State provided us with mains, pipelines, reservoirs and a sewerage system, behind them were many women whose unpaid work was not acknowledged. They were the telephonists, complaint handlers and technical assistants. These women became an important part of the community, taking part in local activities and generally maintaining a positive presence for their husbands and the E&WS staff.

In the 1970s a new social awareness of the role of women emerged and this revolutionised women's employment. In 1984 the E&WS began to develop its Equal Employment Opportunity program. This program saw the emergence of women as experts in their field.

Despite worries from her family that the job might prove to be too much physical work for a woman, the first female apprentice joined E&WS in 1978. The first appointment of a woman civil engineer was in 1985, followed by the first woman employee to achieve executive status in 1991.

Over the years women have moved from silent supporters of men to a visible presence at SA Water including at senior levels. The first female Chief Executive of SA Water was appointed in 2001 after acting in the role for 6 months. Today women are actively encouraged to join the organisation in non-traditional roles, as experts in their field, and in other prominent roles throughout the water industry.



Above - Female Apprentice Ottoway 1980.

Above left - Staff photo of the Waterworks Department, Kent Town, Christmas 1924.

Left - Female typist 1969.