

South Sea Islander women and World War II

From the nineteenth century onwards, South Sea Islander people have been a part of Queensland life and history. Originally brought to Australia as indentured labour, especially for the cane industry, the last of these immigrants arrived early this century [*twentieth century*].

By the outbreak of World War II, these people were elderly men and women – the last generation to have memories of other places and cultures, and of the political struggles to remain in Queensland in the face of the White Australia policy. In the wartime years, they and their descendents were living in towns and villages along the coast of Queensland, on cane farms, and on pastoral stations to the west.

Islander women of the time typically worked before their marriages as domestic help in the town residences of white middle class families, and on pastoral stations. Recruited as girls of thirteen or fourteen straight from school, they remained in these positions until marriage and motherhood, which usually occurred before they were twenty. They lived in the protection of family, community and employer, their leisure spent at church and family parties. The wages they earned – between twelve shillings and £1 a week – were saved to spend on clothes or towards marriage.

Most Islander girls married Islander men, who typically worked seasonally, often away from home. Those who were canecutters or other rural workers left their wives to manage large families with the help of grannies and aunts. Older children were expected to help with younger ones.

Islander girls typically gained positions as cooks, housemaids and laundresses, providing household help and company for isolated women on stations and in country towns. Usually they wore uniforms, often frilly white caps and aprons, modestly covering their legs with lisle stockings. However, as the labour shortage during the war became critical and male labour was no longer available on sheep stations, they were needed outside – to work as cowboys, musterers and general roustabouts.

Contact with Americans, especially black Americans, was an important experience.

For example, Mabel Edmund, then Mabel Mann, at the age of fourteen was employed in western Queensland as a housemaid, working seven days a week for wages of £1 and keep (Edmund 1992 pp. 25-26) An able rider, she was called to muster sheep for shearing when the schoolboy son was the only male labour left on the station.

The majority of Islanders lived near the coast, where the fishing skills of men and women helped feed large families accustomed to low incomes. In January 1942, when fear of a Japanese invasion was at its height, schools in coastal Queensland were closed and evacuation to the south was

encouraged. Islanders, however, did not leave their homes; women maintained the family home while their men were away on military or civil service.

In Rockhampton, Dorothy Warrie, already a mother with several small children, helped her father-in-law with his plant nursery, working late into the night, Rhoda Backo in Ayr operated a laundry to serve American troops stationed there (Mercer 1981 epilogue). At a time when the Islander family commonly had six or seven children, and washdays meant carting water and boiling up, work outside the home pushed women to their limits. But these women of intelligence and talent gained confidence as they learned new skills.

Contact with Americans, especially black Americans, was an important experience for Islander people, who in Queensland were relegated to positions of poverty and servant status. They treated Islanders as equals, often with generosity. American troops based near Joskeleigh (a coastal Islander settlement in the Rockhampton area) would buy watermelons and other produce from the farmers and gardeners, typically calling out 'Keep the change!' as they motored past carts pulled up on the roadside.

The servant status of Islanders was underlined at a critical time in women's lives, child-bearing. In Central Queensland, Islander women were relegated to the 'black ward' at Rockhampton Base Hospital, which was separated from the main maternity section and overlooked the morgue. Islander and Aboriginal women gave birth in their beds, while the labour ward was the preserve of white women. Isolated and out of earshot, at the end of the veranda, they found the experience frightening.

Discrimination based on race was also entrenched in Australian wartime regulations. Men not of substantially European descent were exempt from military, but not civilian, service. (The old 'Sou' Sea boys' remained aliens under the law, but their Australian-born sons and daughters were citizens.) Some men enlisted voluntarily in the armed forces. Others, like John Willie, were called up to join the Civilian Construction Corps, to work on railway and road construction in North Queensland.

Yet wartime conditions also instituted the beginning of a breakdown in institutional racism. The acute labour shortages which developed during World War II, as able-bodied men served in the forces and in essential industries, provided wider employment opportunities for Islanders. The resistance of trade unions to Islander members collapsed, and Islanders found jobs in meatworks and in road and rail construction, moving from rural areas to the towns.

After the war, as labour shortages persisted, the first Islander women started work at Lakes Creek Meatworks in Rockhampton. They were no longer restricted to domestic labour, and gained advantages from working in large, organised and unionised work groups.

Wartime conditions began a breakdown of institutional racism.

Increasingly integrated in the workforce and living in towns, Islander women retained community ties while they took up new opportunities, passing on to their children sure, if modest, expectations of a better place in the sun.

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ENDNOTES

Edmund, M. 1992, *No Regrets*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, pp. 25- 26; pers. comm. 23 March 1991.

Mercer, P. 1981, *The Survival of a Pacific Islander Population in North Queensland, 1900-1940*, PhD thesis, Australian National University, epilogue.