

The Chapters: Miss Anderson's Motor Service

Tess McLaughlan:

State Library Victoria acknowledges the traditional lands of all the Victorian Aboriginal clans and their cultural practices and knowledge systems. We recognise that our collections hold traditional cultural knowledge belonging to Indigenous communities in Victoria and around the country. We support communities to protect the integrity of this information, gathered from their ancestors in the colonial period. We pay our respects to their Elders, past and present, who have handed down these systems of practice to each new generation for millennia.

The year is 1924 and a red Hupmobile touring car is driving the road to Keppel Falls in Victoria's Yarra Ranges. The sun glints off its chrome radiator and leather hood. Inside the car, 6 passengers are enjoying a ride through the lush forest. They're dressed in their best outfits, chatting and laughing as they breathe in the fresh air. The chauffeur stops the car at the edge of an embankment and they gaze at the stunning view of the steep drop that falls into a deep ravine directly below them. But then without warning, the embankment, sodden from recent rainfall, crumbles under the weight of the car, and the vehicle tilts dangerously over the edge. The passengers scream in terror as they feel themselves sliding towards it. Luckily, their chauffeur is quick to react. They jump out of the driver's seat and rush to help the passengers. One by one, they pull them out of the car and guide the passengers to safety, even as the car threatens to fall over at any moment.

When all of the passengers are safe, they don't stop there. With relentless energy, the chauffeur single-handedly winches the car up, stabilises it, and rescues it from falling into the chasm. After this gruelling work, the chauffeur collapses on the grass, panting and covered in mud. They feel every muscle ache and every drop of sweat. They wipe their forehead with a strong hand and catch their breath. The passengers look on in disbelief because they see someone who is nothing like other chauffeurs. In a time when most drivers were men, they see a young woman with short hair and bright eyes. A woman who breaks all the rules of her time and runs her own business. A woman named Alice Anderson. And her story is only just beginning.

Welcome to *The Chapters*, a show from State Library Victoria all about the incredible stories of some of Victoria's unsung trailblazers. Now, you probably know about State Library Victoria's beautiful reading rooms and galleries. You may have even come to

see Ned Kelly's armour on display. But this show is about the stories that are hidden at the Library, the ones that you may never have heard of, and the librarians who discover them. I'm your host, Tess McLaughlan, and I'm lucky enough to spend my days exploring State Library Victoria's rich collection and, in partnership with our talented librarians, bring its stories to you.

When you think of Australian trailblazers, who comes to mind? Maybe you think of Burke and Wills crossing Australia from bottom to top, or one of the many people for whom rooms are named here at State Library Victoria, names like Charles La Trobe, Redmond Barry and Ian Potter. But one name that might not come to mind is Alice Anderson, but she should. Miss Anderson was a pioneer for women in Victoria. Business minded, she turned a touring car into a flourishing business, Australia's first garage run by and for women. Today I'm joined by Sarah Matthews, one of our amazing librarians and an Alice Anderson expert. Sarah wrote an article on Alice for the Library website, and in this episode, she'll share the incredible story of Miss Anderson's motor service. So, let's open another chapter.

Sarah, thanks for joining us on the show today.

Sarah Matthews:

Thanks, Tess. It's great to be here.

Tess McLaughlan:

We're going to go through the story in a lot more detail in this chat, but to start out, can you tell me in a few sentences, who was Miss Anderson?

Sarah Matthews:

Alice Anderson was the first female garage owner in Australia and a wonderful businesswoman, mechanic and advocate for women.

Tess McLaughlan:

We start our story in the town of Narbethong. Alice was born in 1897 in Malvern, and she spent her early years overseas. But things really start to happen when her, her parents and her four siblings moved to the central Victorian town. This time in Narbethong is really formative for the person Alice would go on to become. In the piece that Sarah wrote about Alice, she described her as being able to 'run wild'. I asked her what this actually looked like.

Sarah Matthews:

That was actually a quote that I read in a great book we have here at the Library called *Eat My Dust* by a motoring historian called Georgine Clarsen. Alice was a very

adventurous type. She loved to read Boys' Own Adventure books, actually. I think she probably felt she was in her own real life Boys' Own adventure in Narbethong. She was always outside and she spent a lot of time with her older brother, Stuart, who was four years older than Alice. And he taught her things like how to hunt, how to shoot a gun, skin a rabbit, how to go fishing. I think she did all of that and probably a lot more.

Tess McLaughlan:

And can you tell us the story of Alice saving a man's life at just 15?

Sarah Matthews:

Yeah. Well, this was an amazing story. This particular night – often Alice's dad and her brother were away for work – all the women were in the house alone, her mother and the girls. There was a knock on the door really late at night, and there was a very drunk man standing there asking for help and if they had a telephone that he could use because somebody at the local sawmill had cut his throat. They did have a telephone at the Andersons, but it wasn't working at the time. So Alice grabbed her sister and they jumped on their pony and they actually went to the sawmill to see if they could help. The man they found there was apparently shaking and just gushing blood from his neck and very drunk.

Alice instructed her sister to get a hair from their horse's tail, and she boiled up a pot of water over the fire and they sterilised the hair in the pot of boiling water. And then Alice actually sewed up the man's throat while 3 or 4 men held him down, which is really quite an extraordinary feat, particularly for someone that age, and I really feel says so much about who she was and just her strength of character.

Tess McLaughlan:

She sounds absolutely fearless, and when did her fascination with cars emerge?

Sarah Matthews:

I think it probably came about when her father started getting involved in the motor industry. There were touring cars around in Victoria at the time. It was quite fashionable for people with money to go on tours in the bush, and he came up with this great idea to establish a transport co-op in the local area, and he was going to acquire some charabancs to run that transport for people and they could pay to go from Healesville to Alexandra. I think possibly that's where it began, because once that was up and running, Alice was working in the office, keeping the books, and there was a garage just near the office where the men used to work on the cars. Apparently Alice spent a lot of time watching the men with the cars and hounding them, asking them questions. I think she was very, very interested at that point.

Tess McLaughlan:

And you said charabancs, do you mind explaining what that was?

Sarah Matthews:

Yeah, so charabancs. I had to look up how to pronounce that word because I'd never heard it before. So it was actually a type of old fashioned coach or bus. There were open sides to it and obviously you could transport quite a lot of people in it, but there were no horses, so that's where it differed from a coach. They were motorised and I think the feeling was, and her father's idea was, that they would actually be safer to navigate the roads in that area, some of which were quite treacherous, in one of those motorised charabancs.

Tess McLaughlan:

Speaking of treacherous roads, Alice was the first woman to drive the Black Spur. At the time, this road was described as no place for a woman, which is an odd thing to hear now, but can you tell me a bit about what the Black Spur was like at that time?

Sarah Matthews:

The Black Spur was a very dangerous stretch of road. It's part of the Maroondah Highway now. It travels through the rainforest in the Yarra Valley National Park. But back then, it had a real reputation for being very dangerous. There were a lot of accidents on that road, and they had at least a fatality a year apparently. So, the idea that a woman would be traversing that road on her own in a motorcar was really something, and actually, when she first started doing it, which was doing the mail run for her father's business. It made a real stir and she became a bit of a star. It was reported in the papers, and I think it did a lot for business.

Tess McLaughlan:

The year that Alice drove the Black Spur was 1916, and when she turns 18, things really start to happen for her. As a birthday gift, her father gives Alice a car – and not just any car. Alice is given a Hupmobile touring car.

Sarah Matthews:

The Hupmobile was promoted as the comfort car in the advertisements. Basically, was a 7-seater car, very broad, very, very shiny and attractive with leather upholstered seats. It was a pretty fancy car.

Tess McLaughlan:

There were strings attached to this gift, her father only paid off the deposit. How did she go about paying the rest?

Sarah Matthews:

She was really thrilled with the car, so she was determined that she was going to make it her own. There was a little bit of a threat as time moved on, and she was using it so successfully to create work that her father might decide to take it back if she hadn't paid it off. I think that was probably an added incentive as well. She started keeping books at her father's office to earn money to start paying that car back, and eventually she reached a point where she'd felt she'd learnt all she could learn at her father's business. And so, she actually left and she moved to Melbourne with the car and she got a job as a clerk at the Caulfield Town Hall and started working there. She was apparently quite a hit there. She used to come to work in her car. She was the only female clerk employed there at the time, and she started taking her colleagues out in the car on weekends up to the bush and taking them on tours and so on.

Tess McLaughlan:

Can you tell me a little bit more about those tours and what they would've looked like?

Sarah Matthews:

Touring cars really were very trendy back at that time, particularly for wealthy people. What Alice used to do is she would take groups of people up into the Dandenongs where apparently she was doing all kinds of things that people found very impressive. She used to commentate on the area, and if she didn't know the area very well, apparently she would just make it up. But she also used to do things like – they would all have a picnic usually if they went on a tour somewhere or a day trip, and she used to pack a picnic lunch. She often used to show them things like how to light a fire. There's even mention of her teaching them how to cook chops on the fire. People used to come back and just rave about her tours, they just kept growing in popularity.

Tess McLaughlan:

This feels like a really formative time for Alice. How does she go on to form her garage from here?

Sarah Matthews:

Basically, she got to a point where she was working at the Caulfield Town Hall where she was taking out tour groups every single weekend, so all her weekends were booked out, and I think she just realised she had the beginnings of a potential business there. She decided she would leave the Town Hall and set up business where she was living as a boarder in Cotham Road in Kew. She asked her landlady if that was okay if she started a business out of the back shed, and her landlady said that that was fine. That's where it all began, and from there she went on and she borrowed money to purchase additional cars and she started employing women to work for her.

Tess McLaughlan:

Alice Anderson is a woman starting her own garage where she employs only women and specifically caters for women, but how controversial was it?

Sarah Matthews:

Actually, not so controversial, perhaps at the beginning. I think she was seen more with admiration, and I think one of the reasons for that is that World War I was still on at the time, so a lot of women were stepping up and doing roles that had traditionally been done by men because all the men were away at war. Because another thing Alice did at that time was she worked as a volunteer driver, which a lot of other women who drove did at the time as well, and they used to go to Princes Pier at Port Melbourne and pick up the return soldiers and drive them to the military hospital or home or wherever they needed to go. I think in the spirit of that, perhaps it wasn't as controversial as it might have been in peacetime.

Tess McLaughlan:

The garage itself was pretty unique, wasn't it? Can you tell me a bit about some of the services they would offer?

Sarah Matthews:

The garage was very unique at the time. It was really the first garage of its type in Australia. At the height of the business, I think she had 8 female employees and they did all sorts of work. She'd done an apprenticeship early on as a mechanic for 6 months, a proper apprenticeship in Elizabeth Street in Melbourne. She was a qualified mechanic, so they offered mechanical services. They had a 24 hour chauffeur service that they offered. Apparently, she was the first person to offer scheduled services for your car. She called it the 'once over', I think it was called at the time. She also ran workshops for women where they could learn about how to repair a car; they could learn about mechanics. She trained up women as mechanics, and she even offered a service where she would go out and appraise a potential purchase for women if they were looking to buy a car, which would've been really useful.

I could still use that service today if it was around.

Alice certainly did have quite a lot of fame as time moved on for a whole lot of different reasons. One of the reasons was that obviously it was very unusual for a woman to run a garage and have all women employees, but they also used to test society in other ways. They wore very boyish clothes and that sort of thing, they were quite unconventional. Early on, I think they were actually seen as good examples of the 'modern girl' as they called it, because it was the era of the flappers. Also, women motorists were also travelling into the Outback around Australia, and they

were seen as being pretty glamorous and heroic. There are stories written by a motor historian called Georgine Clarsen about these women coming into Outback towns and just being welcomed like heroes and their cars being showered with streamers and flowers and they've been given gifts and really given the royal treatment. I guess as part of that whole movement, Alice had a fair amount of fame from that. She did her own Outback trip obviously as well.

Tess McLaughlan:

Can you tell us a bit about what a flapper actually is?

Sarah Matthews:

It started, I believe, in the 1910s, but then it's really associated with the 1920s or the Roaring Twenties as it came to be known. Usually they wore their hair short, they did things like listen to jazz music and unconventional things like drinking and smoking in public, and apparently loved to test out other societal norms like sexual freedoms and that sort of thing as well.

Tess McLaughlan:

And you mentioned an Outback trip there, can you tell us what happened with that?

Sarah Matthews:

Alice was planning all sorts of bigger trips. She wanted to go overseas, but she really wanted to see Australia first. She bought a car called a Baby Austin, which was a very small car, and no one had attempted a trip like this in such a small car before, which was probably part of the appeal for her, no doubt. She and her friend, Jessie Webb, they did a 6-week trip to the Outback, to Central Australia. She was sponsored by an oil company, so Alice used to post updates in the newspapers – which you can still read on Trove, they're very entertaining – from her trip. So, she was in the paper quite a lot from that.

Tess McLaughlan:

And can you tell us what Trove is?

Sarah Matthews:

Trove is a really fantastic resource that is run by the National Library of Australia. It's a web search engine, and basically it searches collections from cultural institutions across Australia. It also has a lot of digitised Australian historic newspapers.

Tess McLaughlan:

Then in the year 1926, just when everything is going right for Alice, when it feels like her

story is only just beginning, she has an accident.

Sarah Matthews:

Yes, it's still just really sad when you read about it. She'd only been back from her Central Australia trip for about a week and she'd gone straight back to work in typical Alice fashion. She was cleaning guns at the back of the garage one afternoon because she'd taken some guns to Central Australia just for self-defense purposes, and she'd borrowed them from a friend. One of the guns actually went off and shot her in the head.

No one knows conclusively what happened. There is a bit of conjecture even to this day about what really happened in the garage that day. There were two employees there as well, garage girls as they used to be called, and they did a coronial inquiry into Alice's death, and the girls gave conflicting accounts of what had occurred and sometimes also contradicted themselves as well. One of the things that was really hard for people to understand was how Alice could possibly have done something so careless when she'd been handling guns since she was a child. It was hard to see how she would've been cleaning a loaded gun unless she didn't know that she was doing that. It was ruled an accident, and to this day, no one really knows what happened.

Tess McLaughlan:

Alice's story is so powerful, and I know it's hard to fit someone's entire life into one article. So, I was really curious if there was anything that Sarah couldn't fit into the article, and it turns out that despite her popularity, even Alice wasn't immune from a scandal.

Sarah Matthews:

Alice did struggle with scandal towards the end of her life. There were rumors about the garage and the garage girls being lesbians, and after World War I, I think as the war gradually receded, society's views about women's behavior did change, and perhaps there was a bit of a hardening. So things were obviously very changed for women from that period, and they had a lot more social and economic freedom than they'd ever had before. But I think that the press certainly were starting to push a line that perhaps women had too much freedom now, and there was concern about women delaying marriage and motherhood because they were too busy pursuing a career. Because Alice had always been a boundary pusher, obviously, as those views in society changed, that also had ramifications for her garage and the girls. They were seen as being in competition with the male garages in the area, and that that wasn't necessarily a good thing, which is ironic because as Loretta Smith points out in

her brilliant book, *A Spanner in the Works*, Alice's garage was actually there first.

Tess McLaughlan:

A lot of stories like Alice's are hidden away in the family histories of everyday people. If there's anyone out there who has a story that they'd love to investigate with the Library, how would they do that?

Sarah Matthews:

We do have a dedicated family history team here at the library, they're all fabulous. We have also a dedicated family history and newspapers reading rooms. We also have a lot of research workshops that are available at the Library. If people visit the State Library's homepage and go to the What's On section, you can get a really good idea of some of the workshops that we have on offer.

Tess McLaughlan:

Sarah, thanks so much for joining me on the show.

Sarah Matthews:

Thanks, Tess. It's been great.

Tess McLaughlan:

You've been listening to *The Chapters*, a show from State Library Victoria, all about the incredible stories of some of Victoria's unsung trailblazers. If you're interested in finding out more about today's topic, you can read the article that this episode was based on, which you can find in the show notes. For more information about State Library Victoria's collections, events and services, head over to the Library's website at slv.vic.gov.au or visit us in person.

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This podcast was recorded by State Library Victoria on the lands of the Wurundjeri people.