

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE0998

Gibbs, Pearl Mary

(1901 - 1983)

Born 19010718, Sydney New South Wales Australia

Died 19830428, Dubbo New South Wales Australia

Occupation Aboriginal leader, Political activist, social activist

Summary

Pearl Gibbs was a major figure in Aboriginal political activism from the late 1920s to the 1970s. She was involved in organising the Day of Mourning on 26 January 1938 to protest the invasion; spoke for the Committee for Aboriginal Citizen Rights; supported Northern Territory Aborigines in their conflicts with a frontier 'justice' system; called for Aboriginal representation on the New South Wales Board; set up the Dubbo branch of the Australian Aborigines' League with Bill Ferguson in 1946; became the organising secretary for a new Melbourne-based Council for Aboriginal Rights in 1953; was elected as the Aboriginal member of the Aborigines Welfare Board in 1954 and its only woman member; established the Australian Aboriginal Fellowship (with Faith Bandler) in 1956 and the first hostel for Aboriginal hospital patients and their families in Dubbo in 1960; and continued contributing to Aboriginal conferences throughout the 1970s.

Details

Pearl Gibbs grew up in the Yass and Brewarrina areas. After attending racially-segregated schools at Yass and Cowra, she worked as a maid and cook and married an English sailor named Gibbs. They later separated, leaving Pearl to raise their daughter and two sons. From the late 1920s Pearl started organising Aboriginal protests and from 1937 became a major figure in the Aboriginal political network. She was an early member of the Aborigines' Progressive Association, appearing at meetings in Sydney's Domain and drawing large crowds because a woman speaker was rare and because Pearl spoke with such fluency and passion. During the campaign for full citizen rights and an end to the Aborigines Protection Board, Pearl concentrated on women's issues: 'apprenticeships' ('employment' of Aboriginal girls as domestic servants by the Aborigines Protection Board), school and hospital segregation, health and the meagre Board rations on Aboriginal reserves. She successfully lobbied many women's organisations, including the Sydney Feminist Club, and made wider alliances with centre and left political groups than other Aboriginal activist in New South Wales at the time.

Pearl Gibbs was secretary of the Aborigines' Progressive Association from 1938 to 1940; vice-president and then secretary of the Dubbo branch of the Australian Aborigines' League in the 1940/50s; the organising secretary for a new Council for Aboriginal Rights in 1953; the Aboriginal member of the Aboriginal Welfare Board from 1954 to 1957; and vice-president of the Australian Aboriginal Fellowship in the 1950s.

Events

2001 - 2001

Inducted into the Victorian Honour Roll of Women

Published resources

Book Section

Pearl Gibbs, Goodall, Heather, [1988]

Book

Turning the tide : a personal history of the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, Bandler, Faith, 1989

Journal Article

Gibbs, Pearl, 1971

Gibbs, Pearl, 1962

Gibbs, Pearl, 1957

Gibbs, Pearl Mary (Mrs), 1954

Pearl Gibbs : Aboriginal Patriot, Gilbert, Kevin, 1983

Lovable Natives' and 'Tribal Sisters' : Feminism, Maternalism, and the Campaign for Aboriginal Citizenship in New South Wales in the Late 1930s, Haskins, Victoria, 1998

Aboriginal Sydney, Hoddle, Vance, 2003

Pearl Gibbs : A Biographical Tribute, Horner, Jack, 1983

2001 Eldershaw Memorial Lecture Founding Fathers, Dutiful Wives and Rebellious Daughters, Lake, Marilyn, 2001

Edited Book

Before it's too late : anthropological reflections, 1950-1970 : Jane C. Goodale, Ruth Fink, Jeremy Beckett, L.R. Hiatt and J. A. Barnes, Gray, Geoffrey G (edited and compiled by), 2001

200 Australian Women: A Redress Anthology, Radi, Heather, 1988,

<https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20071105022623/http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/78644/20071105-1315/www.200australianwo>

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Site Exhibition

The Encyclopedia of Women and Leadership in Twentieth-Century Australia, Smart, Judith and Swain, Shurlee (eds.), 2014,

<http://www.womenaustralia.info/leaders>

Author Details

Leonarda Kovacic

Created 8 June 2004

Last modified 21 April 2026