Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE4908

Parsons, Sylvia

(1911 - 2000)

Born	19110917, Gunning New South Wales Australia
Died	20000705, Canberra Australian Capital Territory Australia
Occupation	Business owner, Dressmaker

Summary

Sylvia Parsons was a dressmaker and women's fashion retailer who owned a popular dress shop in Kingston during the second half of the twentieth century. Parsons was active in the Canberra community and hosted regular fundraising fashion shows for local charities.

Details

Sylvia May Parsons was born into one of the capital region's earliest settler families, the Johnsons, on a property near Gunning, New South Wales on 5 July 1911.

She was a talented pianist and in 1935 was accepted as an associate into the Royal Victoria College of Music, London. She continued to teach piano until after World War II.

In 1941 she married a Royal Australian Air Force officer, John Parsons, and moved to Canberra. At the end of the war, the Parsons purchased and built a red brick war service home in the newly formed inner-south suburb of Narrabundah. They had one son, Peter Parsons.

During the war, Parsons taught Home Economics at Kingston Technical College, specialising in dressmaking and design. Immediately after the war, she worked for local businessman Stan Cusack in his Kingston furniture store.

In 1948 she opened her own fashion house on Kennedy Street in Kingston, Sylvia Parsons of Canberra Fashions, where she offered a design and dressmaking service, as well as selling clothes off the rack. One of the first fashion salons in Canberra to make high quality women's wear, Parsons' shop was immediately successful. While the Kingston shop remained her flagship (and favourite) store, trading from 1948 to 1996, eventually the Sylvia Parsons enterprise expanded to include shops in three other locations across Canberra: Manuka (1950 – 1955), Civic (1955 – 1963) and Woden (1972 – 1990).

Parsons is believed to have sold clothing to the Great Train Robber, Ronald Biggs, when he was on the run from the British police in 1966.

Parsons' canny business skills, spirited personality, and community consciousness ensured that she maintained a loyal clientele for almost fifty years.

Throughout her career, Parsons funded and organised exactly 99 fashion shows to raise money for local charities, including Canberra's first Gown of the Year parade. Parsons and her fashion shows were hugely popular, with the last parade drawing an audience of 1250 people. Parsons was also involved in the local chapter of the Soroptimists Club.

In 1997 Parsons made a significant financial donation, as well as an oral history, to the Canberra Museum and Gallery. This contribution prompted the Gallery's collection of historical materials relating to private commerce in Canberra.

Published resources

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Site Exhibition
From Lady Denman to Katy Gallagher: A Century of Women's Contributions to Canberra, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2013,
http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/ldkg

Resource Section
Sylvia Parsons Collection,
http://www.museumsandgalleries.act.gov.au/cmag/SylviaParsonsCollection.html

Parsons collection,
http://www.nma.gov.au/collections-search/results?search=adv&ref=coll&collname=Parsons+collection

Fashioned Here, 2011,
http://www.museumsandgalleries.act.gov.au/cmag/fashioned_here.html

Archival resources

National Library of Australia
[Biographical cuttings on Sylvia Parsons, women's fashion retailer, containing one or more cuttings from newspapers or journals]

ACT Heritage Library
HMSS 0138 Heide Smith Photographs "The Canberrans"

Author Details
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