Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE5427

Bennett-Borlase, Deborah

Occupation Judge, Lawyer, Magistrate, Solicitor

Summary

In 1987 Deborah Bennett-Borlase became the first woman appointed as a Magistrate to the Perth Courts of Petty Sessions in Western Australia

Details

Born at a private hospital in Claremont (the building later occupied by solicitors), Deborah Bennett-Borlase was raised and educated in Perth. She married a farmer in the North Eastern Wheatbelt of Western Australia and, in her words, was somewhat surprised to discover that milk did not come in bottles, nor bread (a catastrophe when made by herself) already sliced for selection. She did learn, however, how to keep the sheep up for the shearers in the sheds, to keep the fires burning on the wind rows of timber cleared by the bulldozers for new paddocks and to drive a tractor and seed crops when necessity required.

Two children and then, later, education became a priority and a move to Perth occurred. With time on her hands Bennett-Borlase enrolled in a Bachelor of Arts at the University of Western Australia. Study, lectures and tutorials were slotted into half the week and the balance driving 200 miles (320km) back to the farm for other duties. Bitten by the study bug after the successful completion of the BA she enrolled in the Law Faculty. On completion of this degree she undertook articles which were split between David Smith of Slee, Anderson and Pidgeon and subsequently Ian Mossenson of Mossenson, Skarlz and Corser & Corser, undertaking mainly criminal matters.

In 1987 she was appointed a magistrate in the Perth Court of Petty Sessions and was welcomed with offers of assistance from generous brother magistrates.

Her circuit was one week at Rockingham and one week in the North East Kimberly region. The latter entailed a lot of road and air travel to Derby, Halls Creek, Balgo Hills, Kununarra and Wyndam. At Rockingham she became the subject of interest of the local chapter of a bikie club whose members tried to follow her from court to her home in Perth several times – this attempt at intimidation failed.

Consternation and amusement arose at her first sitting in Kununarra when a slightly tipsy gentleman came up from the cells and called out “Whd youse coin up there misses? You’d better get down before SM finds you”. The Prosecutor and orderlies, all spruced up for her visit went rigid with embarrassment and she struggled not to laugh.

The experience in the Kimberley was one of the most enjoyable and enriching experiences in her life. The exposure to the Aboriginal people and their problems and joys, along with meeting some of the white pioneers of this area while being exposed to the rugged beauty of the Kimberley landscapes will stay with her forever.

Bennett-Borlase was later posted back to the Perth Court of Petty Sessions and retired in 2002.

Published resources

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Site Exhibition
Australian Women Lawyers as Active Citizens, Trailblazing Women Lawyers Project Team, 2016, http://www.womenaustralia.info/lawyers

Author Details
Michael Borlase with Deborah Bennett-Borlase

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