Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE6020

Arblaster, Mabel Mary

(1882 - 1943)

Born	18820423, Eaglehawk Victoria Australia
Died	19430415, Hampton Victoria Australia
Occupation	Photographer

Summary

Mabel Arblaster was a professional portrait photographer who worked in Eaglehawk, where she opened a studio.

Details

Mabel Arblaster was born in 1882, in the small gold mining town of Eaglehawk, Victoria, into an upper middle class family. She was the second youngest child of the family and left school when she was fourteen years of age.

The Arblaster family owned a gunpowder factory but suffered financially during the Depression, especially after the catastrophic event of the factory blowing up. Nonetheless, when Mabel declared her intention to become a photographer at the age of 18, her father supported her in her quest.

Arblaster entered an apprenticeship with a local chemist, who taught her how to prepare photographic plates as well as darkroom processes. The apprenticeship entailed her working for six months without pay, then a further six months for five shillings per week. She was eventually paid seven and sixpence for the remainder of her time with him.

Arblaster's father set up a studio for her in one of the shops he owned in High St, Eaglehawk, c.1901, which she named The Federal Photographic Studio. Advertisements in the *Bendigo Advertiser* observed that the studio was 'specially designed and built for the production of the highest class of work, such as family groups, wedding groups, groups of football and athletic clubs' *(Bendigo Advertiser* 1901). Even though Eaglehawk was badly affected by the Depression, Arbalester's studio stayed busy. She worked every day of the week and had to employ a messenger to assist her. Arblaster's work shows she was highly competent in lighting, composition and printing techniques. Unfortunately only a few portraits have survived.

Arblaster married John Bell, a school teacher, on 18 April 1906 and then closed her studio. She had a number of children and for a considerable amount of time the Bell family moved from one town to another, before eventually settling in Melbourne. The family came to be quite impoverished, so Mabel was unable to take up photography again.

However, Arblaster did keep her camera with her always, and had it set up on a tripod everywhere she lived. She died in 1943.

Collections

Museum Victoria

Private collections

Published resources

Newspaper Article
Eaglehawk,
http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article89447956

Book
Australian Women Photographers 1840 - 1960, Hall, Barbara and Mather, Jenni, 1986

Resource Section
191 Private Henry Bell,
http://www.fromellesdiscussiongroup.com/abt.pdf

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