Entry type: Organisation
Entry ID: AWE6435

Friendly Union of Soldiers’ Wives and Mothers: Australian Imperial Forces

(1915 - 1946)

Born	19150101
Died	19461231
Occupation	Union

Summary

The Friendly Union of Soldiers’ Wives and Mothers was founded by Lady Helen Munro Ferguson, wife of the Governor General, Sir Ronald Crauford Munro Ferguson, later Lord Novar, soon after the beginning of World War I.

The object of the organisation was:

The promotion of a friendly feeling amongst the relations of members of the A.I.F., and the giving of mutual help and advice in any trouble or difficulty arising in connection with the Members’ affairs.

Details

The first president of the Union was Lady Bridges, wife of General William Throsby Bridges, commander of the First AIF. When General Bridges left his previous position as Commandant of Duntroon Military College in 1914, his wife Edith Bridges and family left Canberra to live at South Yarra in Melbourne.

From Federation in 1901 to the opening of Parliament House in Canberra in 1927, the seat of government was in Melbourne and World War I was prosecuted from Victoria Barracks in St Kilda Road. This presence was reflected in the organisation of the Friendly Union which remained predominantly a Victorian organisation centred on Melbourne and drawing many of its senior members and office bearers from the wives of senior military officers. When Lady Bridges the first president resigned due to ill health to become one of the vice presidents, her place was taken by Lady Chauvel, wife of General Sir Harry Chauvel. The vice presidents included Mrs G.F. Pearce, the wife of the Minister for Defence, Mrs Legge, wife of General J.G. Legge and Mrs Sellheim, wife of General Victor Sellheim. The other vice presidents were drawn from women prominent in patriotic and women's organisations in Melbourne. They included Mrs Eva Hughes, a prominent figure in women's groups as well as charitable and patriotic organisations including holding the position of president of the conservative, anti-socialist group the Australian Women's National League.

The Friendly Union held monthly meetings beginning with a prayer at the Masonic Hall, Collins Street. Subscription rates were set at 1/- per half year for members and 5/- per half year for committee members. Specific roles were established covering the social and organisational aspects of the Union. There was an Organiser for Visiting, an Organiser for Clothing, a Musical Directoress, an Organiser of Social Teas as well as an Honorary Secretary, Assistant Secretary, and Treasurer. A system of District Visitors was set up with women appointed to cover each of the then major suburbs of Melbourne. Almost all the District Visitors lived in the more affluent suburbs in the south-east of Melbourne as did the Committee Members. These suburbs were all allocated visitors, but it is noticeable that for each of the less affluent suburbs, Brunswick, Coburg, Collingwood, Fitzroy, North Melbourne, Preston and Port Melbourne no District Visitor was named.

The establishment of the Friendly Union by Lady Helen was well publicised in country newspapers in Victoria and there is evidence of branches operating in Wangaratta and Geelong. Towards the end of 1915 the Wangaratta branch persuaded Lady Helen Munro Ferguson to break her train journey from Sydney to Melbourne to attend a meeting of the Friendly Union. She urged the hundred women who attended the meeting at the Masonic Hall to draw closer together and seek to strengthen one another by their sympathy and encouragement and kindly words. She also urged them, when they wrote to the 'brave men at the front', to write cheerful and happy letters and not mention 'the little worries at home'.

Although there was a report that branches of the Friendly Union were being established in New South Wales, there appears to be no evidence of activity. Some meetings were held in Perth, Western Australia, but the organisation remained predominantly Melbourne-based. Meetings continued to be held after World War I ended and in Sydney a Friendly Union of Sailors' Wives was active for some years.

Archival resources

Australian War Memorial Research Centre
Friendly Union of Soldiers' Wives and Mothers, Australian Imperial Forces

Author Details
Patricia Clarke

Created 14 February 2019
Last modified 18 February 2019