

# A Personal History of Woolgoolga Art Group.

By

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## WAG History

Woolgoolga Art Group or WAG as it is known by long term members was formed by a group of painters who met at Marion Strong's residence about 1972 for informal painting sessions. The original members were June Mather, Alma Dew, Parma Keft, Jan Haskins. Wendy Maxwell, Norma Ainsworth, Lorna Munro, Val Wright, Clara Andrews. Of the original members still alive only June and Alma have had continuous membership since WAG's inception.

I moved to Woolgoolga in late 1977. One of the first people I met was June Mather. As we talked I mentioned that I had seen the little shop down town that the Art Group was running. I also mentioned that I thought I would join the Art Group after we settled in. She asked me what other hobbies I was interested in as I was working tapestries and doing embroidery at that time. She mentioned that WAG would be shortly running pottery classes and was I interested? Of course I was as I had been given 2 tiny pieces of clay to work in High School and had fallen in love with the medium and now 11 years later I was being offered a chance to allow a dream to become true. So began a life long passion for ceramics and a long association with WAG.

The members then were (that I can remember)–

June Mather(painter/potter), JanHaskins(painter/potter) , Robyn Chart (Lawrence) (painter/potter), Alma Dew(painter), DeniseHolder(painter),Wendy Maxwell(painter), Norma Ainsworth(painter), Shirley Young ( whose husband did lapidary), Clara Andrews(painter), Jean van Bodegraven(painter -who was living in Coonabarabran and only holidaying in Woolgoolga at that time), Alison Carter(potter), Lal McEwan(painter/fabric artist), Dorothy Skinner(dolls clothes/crochet), Lorna Monro(painter), Val Wright (painter) Shirley Clinch (potter – no longer active but had been a member), Owen Clements (painter), Parma Keft (no longer active but had been a member. Shirley Lloyd (potter), Joyce Richardson (potter), Loraine Stevens (potter) and Marnie Yeates (potter/photographer) all joined just after me when the pottery classes started.

The shop that members were then running was located opposite the Seaview Tavern on the corner of River Street and Clarence Street in the block of shops, now rebuilt, after a fire consumed the original premises and now occupied by Little Ripper Barbershop and Vet surgery. Owen Clements owned the old building that was there and ran a tiny corner grocery shop. As he was a past President of WAG and an artist he was kind enough to only charge us a nominal rental provided we manned the shop and yes even in those far back days we had trouble getting members to do duty and keep the shop open.

The Group was also renting an old house next to Jan Haskins in Fawcett Street, I think then, for the princely sum of \$6 per week which we used as a meeting house and for a small daily fee as a workshop. It was at this time that I held my first position on Committee as Clara Andrews who was the Treasurer felt she could no longer continue and resigned mid term. I had only been a member for a very short time and the Group had to take me on trust. I served on later committees as Treasurer, Secretary, Assistant Treasurer/Secretary, Vice President, Pottery Supplies Officer and general dogsbody. We had a great deal of fun and camaraderie in that old house as well as a very vibrant group for what was a very small village of 1700 people in those days. Some weeks we battled to find the rent money and to even dream of founding an art group with their own premises speaks a lot for the vision of our founding members when up till then the main recreation in town had been the football team.

Our first pottery class was held there with Rae la Spina as the tutor for ten weeks and thereafter we were on our own. Rae fired our first class made pots at her home in Coffs Harbour. After the class finished we had great difficulty finding someone to fire our pots and had the continued problem of finding someone with a kiln to do so as kilns were extremely expensive in those days. Faye Smith helped us out several times with several of us transporting the work in and out to Charlesworth Bay. The ever present problem of breakage when transporting raw pots as well as the difficulty in firing work by a range of students making many different sizes, thicknesses and shapes caused quite a few challenges. After much searching the Central School came to our aid and we used their kiln for a fee and contribution to the cost of repairs.

Jan Haskins' husband, Phil made us an old pottery wheel out of an old washing machine after the lessons finished. I taught myself to throw on that wheel with a pottery book propped up in front of me, reading and looking at the pictures as I went. The wheel head never ran completely true so it was a major challenge to even produce a pot but with a great deal of persistence, much clay on walls, floor and me I did eventually manage to learn.

Eventually the Fawcett Street house was sold and we then held monthly meetings at Woolgoolga Central School. The potters, through the generosity of the Principal found a new home and managed to meet weekly at what was then Woolgoolga Central School (the only school then in Woolgoolga) in an old converted milk shed. It only had slat walls with a gap of four inches all the way around the floor and could be quite cold in winter or when the southerly winds were blowing. We would often sit potting with our feet up above floor level in an effort to keep them warm in winter. Quite often we would all be sitting on the kiln side of the room in an effort to at least keep our backs warm. I used to load the kiln on the Sunday night before our Monday get together, set it to come on at 4 o'clock the next morning, go down at 6a.m and turn it up and it would be halfway to temperature by the time we arrived at 9a.m. and could finish the firing as we were working. If the kiln had not switched off by 3p.m. I would stay and finish. One afternoon it was very slow and would not

reach temperature so I went home and came back at 6p.m. My daughter was 5 or 6 at the time and getting very sleepy by 7p.m. so I placed a fold up mattress up on the pottery table for her to sleep on while I continued to pot and wait. Jan Haskins came down and joined me in the vigil. We both continued potting with a sleeping child on the table between us. We managed to get the temperature up to just over 900 degrees and at 9 p.m., after a very long day, it still had not reached full temperature so we switched the kiln off. We later found out the elements were damaged and it would never have reached temperature. We had quite a strong group of potters, but no tutor. If any one of us went on a trip somewhere and saw a new technique or idea we would bring it back to the Group and figure out how to do it and so we learned a lot of each other. Those years of learning, building a skill base and sharing from other potters and fellow members of WAG were some of the most instructive I ever had in learning pottery with a great fellow spirit of camaraderie. Before we even had a building our very first pottery workshop was a glazing workshop with Janet de Boos who is one of the foremost glaze experts in Australia. This was a great coup for tiny little Woolgoolga in those days.

After the rental on the little old house ceased and the shop we were renting from Owen closed we ran a monthly fundraising market stall in Don Clinch's Surfside Plaza (where Bonettos Coffee Shop is now) to keep our profile as a Group. The market stalls were always held under what was then the National Bank awning (now where the Real Estate is) as the Bank was not open on Saturdays. We would all arrive with our pots, paintings, dolls clothes, crochet and anything else we thought would sell along with our tables and chairs and the monthly donation for a raffle that one of us had made. A commission of 20 percent on all craft and art sold went to the Group and it also helped promote us to the general public to keep new members joining.

Our first exhibitions which were held three or four times a year were on an old paling fence, in the same area (Surfside Plaza), which Don and Shirley Clinch had placed nails in for us to hang paintings on and off cuts of 4 inch posts were also nailed randomly to place the pots on. The paintings and pots looked quite picturesque amongst the plants. June Mather tells me that part of the profits from the first exhibition that was run in this manner was donated to the Ambulance service for equipment. From the very start of exhibitions WAG had a history of donating to charity. Eventually we decided we needed more hanging space and some wooden frames were constructed with chicken wire and hessian to hang the paintings on. The problem of outdoor exhibitions soon became apparent. On one of their first outings a raging southerly buster was blowing so we were all hanging on with one hand to the frame and trying to steady paintings with the other. It did not take many outings and southerly winds for us to realise they were not strong enough. With a few modifications Jan's husband Phil again helped out by welding up 4 frames which we covered in pegboard to hang the paintings on. It was a real hassle to transport them to and fro as we had no storage area and I am sure Jan got sick of them in her garage. Eventually we worked out a system of pegs and weights and these frames eventually became the first display frames in

the gallery after a few more modifications. The spirit of camaraderie was very strong and we worked very hard with absolutely nothing but a huge will to succeed and had great fun doing it.

As a group with very limited funds we looked at many sites in Woolgoolga to try and buy. I think we had finally managed to save about \$5000 through outdoor exhibitions, market days, fundraisers, etc. We looked at the old Picture theatre which was next to the Seaview Tavern and would have been ideal site but it was weatherboard and in very poor repair with a distinct lean to the north on one side and was held in place by banana props. It was shortly thereafter demolished. Occy Featherstones old weather board butcher shop (where Neil Curralls Smash Repair shop is now) was for sale for \$16000 was again ideal but beyond our means and also had a few white ant problems. Don Clinch who was then the only real estate agent in town advised us very strongly to buy an old house we looked at for \$25000 on the corner of Market Street and Queen or Carrington Street but again funds and white ants in the building were a problem. We would struggle to build our funds in the hope of getting a deposit on a house or even land and prices would surge and everything was again out of our reach as land prices were sometimes doubling every six months. It appeared as if we would never be able to afford anything. We continued to hold monthly meetings at the Central school with painters June Mather, Jan Haskins, Robyn Chart, Lal MacEwan and the potters, forming the backbone of the Group.

Our little group of potters and painters was steadily growing and becoming more confident as artists so we decided to hold our first exhibition in a building! We may have been very small but we always thought big as a Group. Kumbaingeri Zoo (halfway to Coffs Harbour) offered us space in their function room and our first exhibition was held there and very well attended by many people from both Coffs Harbour and Woolgoolga with excellent sales. We decide to repeat the experience the following year, again with good sales. Our next exhibitions were held in Woolgoolga at the Masonic Lodge on the Highway for several years and then a small gallery opened up in the building next to the NRMA garage in River Street and offered us exhibition space there. This was during the eighties when small gallery spaces were opening up all across the country, crafts had made a huge surge in popularity and handmade pottery was king with much easier access to kilns, technology and a buying public who were willing to spend on handmade. Unfortunately the Gallery could not sustain themselves and they closed down with the loss of a venue for us again.

Marnie Yeates had joined our Group after a successful career in education and decided to run for and was elected to Council. She was a lady of immense capability and practicality. Through her contacts she advised us that two blocks of land in Turon Parade were to be made available, on lease, to community groups as part of the conditions of sub division and she advised us to apply for one. We realised at the time that visibility to passing trade for sales would always be a problem for us in this location but this was our only chance, after many years of struggle, of getting a home so we accepted. Finally the lease was signed and

then investigations begun on how to fund a building. Again Marnie knew who to contact and we successfully applied for our first grant to build our home. The building was funded in equal parts by the \$10,000 we then had in funds, a \$10,000 grant by Coffs Harbour Council and a \$10,000 grant from the State Government. With that money we managed to build the kitchen area and a display space to hang and sell our work which went from the kitchen to where the opening into the wall is now for the BiCentennial Wing. Robin Charts then husband, Michael, supervised the original building with working bees from members to help out. Somewhere in our history files there is a photo of June Mather, Wendy Maxwell and myself painting the trusses before they went into place.

To help raise extra funds we decided a Lamington Drive was a good idea. How hard could it be as the schools held them regularly? To save money we decided to make the lamingtons ourselves. June Mather volunteered the use of her garage, sources of sponge cake were investigated and it was decided that we could get the sponge cake in large flat slabs from Grafton and it could come down on the bus the day before we were to make the lamingtons. Sizes were calculated and how many we could get out of each slab, orders taken, money collected, sponges ordered, icing sugar, cocoa and coconut ordered, volunteers organised into a production line, Junes garage cleaned and set up ready to go. From memory I think we had to make about ninety orders of either a half dozen or a dozen lamingtons. That did not sound much. We could do it easy? After a little trial and error on how thin the cocoa should be the first dozen lamingtons were made so neatly with hardly any mess but they took over fifteen minutes to make. At this rate we were going to be there all day and probably into the night. The production line had to be speeded up. By the end of the afternoon Junes garage was not quite so clean and now had a lamington look floor and tables and the makers of the lamingtons were a bit the same way. We cleaned the garage as best we could but sugar and water when mixed have a very sticky tendency and when Junes husband Brian parked his car in the garage that night I believe the floor was still not quite fit to walk on and Brian's shoes stuck to the floor. The lamingtons were all delivered on time but we never had another lamington drive,

When our very basic little building was finished we were absolutely delighted that we finally had a home even though by modern standards it was very humble and we now had absolutely no money in the bank. The sense of satisfaction we had in that tiny little space was incredible as Woolgoolga was growing rapidly but it was still a very small town. We ran our first classes and had a display of members work for sale. We had a moveable wall (the original screens that we had used outdoors on castors) in the kitchen area which could be pushed out into the Gallery space so there was a little bit more room for the classes and visitors to the Gallery could proceed around the artists working to view the art works on the walls and also see how art was made. For many people this was a great fascination as many

had not seen art being made and it also gathered us many new members and also quite a few sales.

We also ran pottery lessons with Stephen Prince as tutor in the kitchen before we had a dedicated pottery room. Our first kiln was installed in the kitchen area where the store room is now and helped keep us warm on cold winter nights when it was running and we had classes or meetings. June Mather tells me that Tom Offord (painting tutor) left a painting to dry on top of the kiln one night when it was on and left the painting a little too long and singed the edges.

Our sense of achievement at finally having a home was immense but we had spent all our funds to build and now we had to keep financing this wonderful home that we had worked so hard for. The inside of the Gallery was painted by the members and with regular working bees every month to keep the grounds mowed and weeded we were keeping up the maintenance. We were running an annual exhibition at the Gallery in October with non members participating and we used to hang several hundred works in the very tiny space we had. Any space we had was utilised and the nails are still in the roof trusses to show how high we used to hang to get everything displayed. Lal McEwan was Social Secretary at this time and absolutely loved to organise social functions so Melbourne Cup, Easter, our anniversary, winter solstice, etc were always used as fundraisers for the Gallery with members doing the catering, charging an admission fee and helping to raise much needed funds. Lal and June Mather always used to say "Any excuse for a Party" but it always had a very serious intent of fundraising behind the fun. Our venue was known as a focus for the arts in our community and its social functions. Out of this came the idea that we should publish a cook book of the recipes that our members were using for our social functions and so the WAG Cookbook came about with Lal co-ordinating and editing recipes and a grant to help fund the printing.

About this time Williamsons' Toyota who were car dealers in Orlando Street, Coffs Harbour approached the Group, as they knew we were an enthusiastic bunch of people who had undertaken all sorts of things like painting murals (railway station, nursing home) and participating in community events. They asked us whether we would be interested in holding an art exhibition in their show rooms in conjunction with the launch of a new car. Of course we were interested and that is where I first met Neil Lawrence who came to be involved in the Group and the first life member.

Neil Lawrence joined our Group at a very exciting time and he came up with the idea we should have an Art Exhibition as a fundraiser. It was not going to be just to be any old exhibition. It should be really big! Nothing like we had done in the past and it should be held in Coffs Harbour with really good prize money, top artists, well publicised and professionally run and of course just an interesting thought "It should be the best on the North Coast and possibly all of N.S.W." He also thought that if we donated a portion of the funds raised to charity then it would help us to obtain sponsorship and relieve some of the fundraising

burden on us. We had worked so hard just to get our building, we were running an annual exhibition at the Gallery and now he wanted us to extend ourselves further and also give away some of the money. Many of us thought a little group like ours could not possibly execute this vision but it was a testament to Neil's quiet tenacity and dedication that we all eventually gave in and had our first "Coffs Harbour Advocate Art and Craft Exhibition" of to a wonderful start. With the success of the first exhibition came the confidence to realise we could do it and the financial benefit was we could continue to run the Gallery and also expand with the building of the pottery room as our first extension, The workroom at the back of the Gallery was also funded in this manner. Eventually the "Coffs Harbour Advocate Art and Craft Exhibition" morphed into "Coffs Harbour Lillipilli Art and Craft Exhibition." One of the other spin offs of CHACE was that WAG regularly donated to various charities up to one third of our profits. Some years it would only be \$700 but other years it would be over \$1000. I have no idea how much we eventually donated but it must have been at least \$10,000.

As funds built up and the Bi Centennial year approached Neil then had another idea. By this time we were beginning to get used to his ideas and together with Marnie Yeates help it was decided that we should add a new wing onto the Gallery by applying for another grant. In 1988 the Bi Centennial wing, now the front 2 storey part of the Gallery, was funded again(\$30,000) by equal amount from the Coffs Harbour City Council, the Federal Government and Woolgoolga Art Group. The wing was completed after a lot of supervision and work by Neil and that little dedicated band of workers. During all this time Neil also ran Art classes and had his own exhibitions. Neil and his wife Robin (one of the founding members of the Group) opened a successful design business in Coffs Harbour. After Neil fell ill they sold the business and the travelled around Australia before returning to Coffs Harbour.

Alan Woods joined the Group after a career in music and became President. His wife Midge accompanied him to our functions. Midge was very interested in the Nursing Home fundraising and asked if we would act as co-ordinators for a Door knock fundraising drive and as she had experience in Sydney we agreed. The maps of Woolgoolga came out, areas were divided up, ads placed in newspapers, receipt books and money counters organised, canvassers allocated and the cars warmed up with the focus of it all being Woolgoolga Art Gallery. Midge was hoping we would raise over \$10,000 for the nursing home. I cannot remember exactly the amount but I do know it was over \$5000. Midge later became our very efficient Treasurer and gave us many hours of service without ever exhibiting a thing as she always said she had no artistic talent and that Alan was always the artistic one in the family.

To be continued.