

*Peter Shea, January 2023*

Social changes often occur before their time. They might happen when coincidences collide, barriers are bypassed and serendipity takes over. They flourish for a time, they wither in the premature environment where they have landed and then, they quietly disappear only to be re-born sometime later, on a firmer footing. Such was the temporary emancipation of women's rowing in Adelaide between 1907 and 1940, now scarcely remembered as so few records are extant. This fascinating story has only emerged after patching together strands from many press reports of the period and literally, reading between those lines.

### **The headline story**

Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a flurry of rowing activity in Adelaide. All the competitive clubs were male. The rowers strutted and competed, attracting column metres of daily press coverage and vast crowds: up to 20,000 eager spectators (and punters) watching from the banks of the River Torrens and its lake Whereas women had occasionally competed interstate in Australia since 1865, in South Australia women's boating was more for leisure and display of fashion. The only competitive aspect of women's rowing was between oar, parasol and voluminous petticoat.

Journalists waxed on about the manliness of the sport.

*'Rowing will ever hold its sway as training conducive to masculine muscularity and healthy outlook on daily life which usually characterises a clean body and development of the best moral qualities'<sup>1</sup>*

*'a proper conduct of rowing was such to make the manliest and best of citizens'<sup>2</sup>*

*A rower was praised for his 'athletic and sterling manly qualities, accompanied by an upright character'<sup>3</sup>*

Society clearly held that competitive rowers were male. Even the annual Ladies Challenge Shield, a copy-cat UK import from Henley tradition, was only ever intended for male rowers.

By April 1907, breaking news announced an event

*'..unique in the history of rowing in SA.'<sup>4</sup>*

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This was a regatta for women rowers - to encourage

*'the fair sex [to] indulge regularly but without excess in rowing'.*

4 female crews participated, identified by costume only as no club names were recorded at the time. One was The Original Ladies Rowing Club which quickly became a dominant, competitive force and remained so until it disappeared in 1929.

The ladies' hope in 1907 was that this rowing initiative might impress the South Australian Rowing Association to include a women's race in the coming Summer Regatta. But that was not to be.

It was nearly 4 years later in early 1911<sup>5</sup> that the South Australian Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) Rowing Club joined the battle, heralded by the American-trained Secretary who enthusiastically appealed for women to enjoy sport by getting tired, sweaty and dirty through fierce competition. This was revolutionary talk. Lady Goode of the YWCA management committee saw it in another light – as rather the lesser of evils:

*'rowing was a healthy sport from which ladies would benefit more than slouching around the streets of Adelaide'<sup>6</sup>.*

By December 1911, there were 9 active ladies rowing clubs. All took part in the then-annual Henley on Torrens parade, a hugely popular extravaganza which had started the year before, copying that already developed for Melbourne. Yet despite the supportive press coverage for ladies inclusion in the sport, the state Rowing Association again desisted from adding ladies races to the coming January Summer Regatta. However, the Association did allow a women's race in the Autumn Regatta of March 1912. That turned out to be a one-off concession because in the very next year a similar request was summarily rejected.

This local setback did not deter the clubs. In early 1913 ladies crews were invited to and did compete in an interstate Melbourne Regatta. Their arrival received a warm welcome by both male and female state representatives. Regional centres also seemed to be more broad-minded for shortly after the Melbourne foray, the Original Ladies Club was invited to participate in the Murray Bridge Regatta, a decision of even more significance as the Regatta Committee had initially rejected the advance some weeks earlier. Times were changing.

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The state Rowing Association then back-flipped. It decided to include a Ladies Race in its 1913 March Autumn Regatta. But this was a Clayton's inclusion. The Association arranged for a short interval in the men's Regatta during which the ladies could have a race amongst themselves<sup>7</sup>. Even this concession was conditional: the race course was intentionally shortened so *'that will not make the journey too long and strenuous'*.

This unique race happened, received good press coverage including a full broadsheet of photographs and yet it did not get a mention in the Association's records of the year. This reflected the status of women rowers at the time. A feature of later years was for ladies' clubs to be regularly invited to serve tea and biscuits at rowing open days, yet barred from competitive rowing at the Association's Regattas.

By October 1913, new ladies clubs had been formed in the regional centres of Port Pirie, Wallaroo and Mannum. With a growing state-wide network of clubs, the collective view of the ladies was that enough was enough -it was time to act.

In November 1913, the clubs voted to form the South Australian Ladies Rowing Association which was inaugurated in January 1914 at the Mannum Regatta. The Association's first act was to endorse a championship race on that very day of inauguration. The Association then organised its own Ladies Regatta which was held on 28 March 1914, again scoring a full broadsheet of photographs in the Adelaide press to complement glowing descriptions. Within months, 11 ladies' clubs had affiliated to the Association, confident after such an industrious start that it would continue to unify, professionalise and organise this sport for women.

An innovation introduced in regattas organised by the ladies clubs and its Association was mixed sex crews. Early examples abound in 1913 and 14, the most frequent partner male club being Torrens Rowing Club. It was an enduring feature from then on, and some male clubs reciprocated by having a similar arrangement at their own club outings.

And then the first World War intervened. The impact was gradual but inexorable: initially fewer male crews, fewer regattas or invitation races and declining funds available to the male clubs as many rowers enlisted. By mid 1916, country clubs had abandoned regattas and by 1917 the major male dominated Association regattas were postponed for the

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duration of the war. Club membership fell sharply. The Commonwealth Club was an exception in addressing its members shortage: it opened rowing membership to both men and women – radical indeed. Other clubs were less revolutionary. The Torrens Club did not invite women to become members, yet it certainly encouraged mixed and women crews, and with approval of the school, opened its boatshed to rowers from St Peters Girls.

The ladies clubs were less impacted by members leaving for military service, enjoying instead improved finances as more women entered the workforce. They competed against each other with vigour, frequently held patriotic functions with other sports, and organised mixed crew regattas offering greater participation and hence more events. Dating from the commencement of the Ladies Association, there was a noticeable buzz at events as rowing became a more appealing topic to newspaper editors and journalists. Firstly there was the novelty of such glamorous crews, whose dress code during those few years changed to much more practical attire – in itself this was an intriguing fashion subject. Secondly, to counter the gloom of the war years, the ladies clubs programmed extra competitive contests to supplement the few hosted by male clubs, thereby receiving strong press coverage whenever they appeared.

The total number of South Australian women who rowed in those early years exceeded 200. Yet many of these quickly lost interest and left the sport which reflected the inevitable decline as the first flush of enthusiasm for any new sport diminished. A core of the more serious sportswomen stayed with their crews, joining battle to test which of 5 competitive clubs would emerge the strongest. In this mix of clubs was The Barcarolle<sup>8</sup> which from 1915 onwards increasingly featured as a race winner.

There is no record of why The Barcarolle was named thus. Certainly a music connection was possible as a number of rowers women were talented singers – but that linkage has never been established. The club quickly rose to dominate the sport, absorbing many of the YWCA rowers as that club moved away from the concept of 'unhealthy competition'.

The Original club with its consistent crew remained competitive. And Port Pirie's Ladies Rowing Club often snatched victory when none was assumed. Nevertheless The Barcarolle demonstrated staggering form winning the local Association league regularly, the state

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championships (each year from 1915 to 1923) and the national championships (each year from 1923 to 1927).

However, dominance of a sport by a single club damages local competition. Although in 1920 South Australia's inclusion in the newly formed Australian Women's Rowing Council opened entry for the South Australian crews into national competition, competition within the state declined which led to the South Australian Ladies Rowing Association disbanding in 1923 reportedly through disagreement and reducing interest.

Male rowing slowly recovered after the world war ended and by the late 20s was again a favourite sport for both the rower and the punter. The Henley on Torrens Regatta was reinstated, regularly attracting crowds of 60-80,000 throughout the decade. Yet despite the public enthusiasm for the sport, there was a widening separation between interest in hotly contested men's races and that for the very few women's races at Regattas.

The superior Barcarolle club won both national and state races throughout the 1920s, as other clubs probably questioned - why bother? - and disbanded. Whilst the Barcarolle had phenomenal success, in time the Original became the sole remaining competitor until it was last reported in 1928 – serving tea at the open day of a city club - and by its silence thereafter, was assumed to be defunct by the next year.

In truth, by 1929 women's rowing in the state was losing its way. The Barcarolle and Port Pirie clubs had a serious falling out over handling eligibility for the State representative crew, acrimony was expressed publicly, the Barcarolle club imploded - firstly by deposing the Secretary and then disbanding totally in 1931.

And then there might have been none.

But keen rowers always find a way to continue. The demise of the Barcarolle was because of a jostle for control. Almost on the day of its collapse, two new ladies clubs emerged: the Railways Institute Ladies Club, renamed Riverside in 1933, and the Adelaide Ladies Rowing Club. This was not a mere coincidence. These two clubs absorbed most of the competitive Barcarolle rowers.

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A few years of exciting competition followed during which glory was predominantly with the Riverside Club, yet by 1940 there was a void in city women's clubs as both of these had disappeared from the rowing calendar leaving no replacement.

### **The back-story: supporting the rise of women's rowing**

Frank Jolley managed the City Bridge boathouse and refreshment rooms on the Torrens River, which he inherited in 1898. Whilst his brother Ernest was content to continue a basic business model in the second premises on Torrens Lake near Morphett Bridge, Frank had greater ambitions for the City Bridge establishment – such as forming his own rowing club<sup>9</sup> to supplement hiring pleasure boats by the hour. He set about this in 1900 culminating in his trial racing regatta in 1901. Alas, that seemed to be the end of his club ownership ambition. Instead he looked to servicing existing rowing clubs. In 1907, he was the coach for all crews in the women's 'unique' exhibition regatta<sup>10</sup>. By 1912 he had leased space within his shed for storing the YWCA and Sunshine Girls boats. When he rebuilt his grand City Bridge Pavilion in 1914 to replace the shed destroyed by fire earlier that year, he provided separated space for 4 ladies rowing clubs<sup>11</sup>, thereby avoiding their need for prohibitive site acquisition and shed construction.

Frank was a colleague of Charlie Kellett, the inaugural Captain and co-founder of the Torrens Rowing Club which was based next door to Jolley's Boathouse. The pair had interest in many sports, notably rowing, and they shared a common vision of encouraging women's participation in rowing. Having witnessed the indifference shown by the male Association, Charlie nurtured the birth of the South Australian Ladies Rowing Association, was elected its first Chairman in 1913, and held that position until he retired in 1917. He was the engine behind the very industrious start of that Association. Frank and Charlie worked indefatigably to successfully grow the Association and its affiliated clubs – by drafting the rules of association, organising events, provision of shed space and social networking through fund raising and mixed crew selection. This dynamic Association in conjunction with energetic clubs worked as a rowing power-house because it included a number of extra-ordinarily talented women rowers who weaved superb rowing performance into this golden era of women's sports management.

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Thelma Moyes was captain of The Original Club in 1908 which started with an initial membership of 3. She competitively rowed with that club until its demise in 1929. Mary Donnell was an organisational genius as Secretary of the Ladies Association from 1913-1923, simultaneously she was Secretary of The Barcarolle from to 1923 and a permanent member of the winning Barcarolle crew. Jo Thomas was also a crew member of The Barcarolle from 1915 to 1930; Secretary and Treasurer for part of that period; founder, Secretary, Treasurer and rower for the Adelaide Ladies Rowing Club 1931-34; rower in the Riverside Club in 1937, and finally Secretary to the re-formed Women's Association from 1935-40. She rowed 9 times for the state and in 1929 was called '*the premier woman rower of the Commonwealth*<sup>12'</sup>. Adele Hill rowed for the state over 10 consecutive years, had roles of Captain, and rowed continuously with The Barcarolle then Railways until she retired in 1937 – oddly to concentrate on her cricket abilities.

These superb sportswomen plus up to 30 more experienced female rowers made up an exceptionally skilled rowing cadre who consistently appear in boat crews from 1913 to 1935. Even as clubs disappeared, notable crews remained intact, an example being the combination of Moyes, Thomas, Hill and Donnell which was repeatedly successful in the women's championship 4 oar races.

This combination of unqualified male organisational support and female rowing expertise made women's competitive rowing in South Australia so successful during this brief window of exposure.

### **The back-story: external sniping and internal back-biting**

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was no question that society regarded rowing as a man's sport.

The social reaction to the increasing interest of women in the sport started with mild amusement and ridicule. It graduated to smutty sarcasm, passed through jealousy in the 1920s with an increasing tendency to ignore female involvement in the sport and culminated in hostility in the 1930s.

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Lord Lonsdale whose sporting prowess elevated him to a position of influence throughout the Commonwealth. He was asked of his opinion about women rowing.

*'I am against it and I tried to stop it' he said<sup>13</sup>.*

This type of reactionary push-back was not unique to rowing: a similar response was directed to many women who ventured towards the boundary of competition with the superior male.

Many sportsmen and influencers sincerely believed that women were neither physically nor mentally equipped to deal with the pressure of competitive sports. By 1929, opposition had honed in on the possible adverse health impact of rowing as a justifiable barrier to participation. Global events encouraged those locally opposed. Press coverage of the 1928 Olympics highlighted the number of women who collapsed after events due to exhaustion or who were emotionally distraught, and that occurred to both losing or winning competitors, the critics were quick to point out. This spurred the French to demand a doctor's certificate of female fitness before permitting team selection. Such an option was also considered in Australia<sup>14</sup>. In a short time these beliefs contributed to the banning of women from competitive rowing events firstly in NSW<sup>15</sup> and then in Victoria<sup>16</sup>. The peak national rowing body kindly encouraged women to participate in short rowing races, but at the same time, they refused women membership<sup>17</sup>, thereby categorising their involvement as recreational exercise.

And consistently, the commentary was woefully patronising. The Mothers Union<sup>18</sup> lamented that *'..so much freedom for women does not seem to have improved the world. What a neurotic, excitable generation is growing up around us... the result of an excess of freedom'*.

One of the early champions of women's competitive rowing was the YWCA in 1910. Yet by 1930, attitudes within that organisation had turned full circle. The then Secretary came out blasting against women using their new found freedom on inappropriate sports like competitive rowing which she maintained might cause irreparable injury in the strain of a race<sup>19</sup>.



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The (male) General Secretary of the YWCA<sup>20</sup> was happy to see girls

*'...take a bump without grumbling, learn to be good losers and not gloat over those who were beaten. But, they should stick to sports most suitable for women and not for a minute imagine they can run a marathon.'*

The YWCA put another oar in the works the following year, when the then Secretary agreed with the decision of the NSW Athletics Association to ban women from competing for Olympic selection<sup>21</sup> as heavy training was probably too much for the average woman. The 1931 Henley on Yarra festival refused to include any female rowing activities<sup>22</sup>, despite Victorian women rowers being much more active than those in South Australia.

Nevertheless women rowing received considerable support from the more enlightened men's rowing clubs throughout this time, notably from the Torrens, Adelaide, University and Commonwealth/Mercantile clubs. The initial champion in Torrens was Charlie Kellett, ably supported by fellow liberal members such as Broadbent, Riebe, and Payne, many of whom took on voluntary management roles in the Ladies Associations. The most significant overlap period was 1912-1917 during which there was a Torrens participant or official at every Ladies outing. However with the loss of Kellet to Victoria in 1917 and the death of coach Oswald in 1918 whilst on active service, the ladies clubs lost two huge champions. Yet over the next two decades, the club continued to support the women's clubs and Torrens representatives served as association, club and race officials, joined mixed crews and contributed to fund raising.

Women's clubs received strong support from Frank Jolley personally and through access to the Jolley Pavilion. Frank however gave up the lease of the Pavillion to others in 1919 and then quit the Torrens River and Lake precinct. The Pavilion at City Bridge probably continued to lease boat storage space to ladies clubs. Though Ernest Jolley reclaimed the lease for the family in 1928, the strong connection between Jolley and women rowers had been weakened.

The final nail in the coffin of women's rowing was undoubtedly the loss of members' commitment<sup>23</sup> and reducing public interest. This was initially evident by the winding up of the Ladies Association first in 1923, again in 1932 and finally sometime after 1935. Over

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time, fewer ladies clubs stayed with the sport, likely because of one or other of the circumstances mentioned here. The most spectacular denouement though was the demise of The Barcarolle. Although the trigger for the collapse was relatively minor – an interpretation of rowing rules and press releases by the Secretary – a strong undercurrent must have been slowly building to cause a membership spill to depose her and then, as the club remained fragmented, to disband.

A mystifying rejection of the past glory of women's rowing occurred when the achievements of the successful Railways Institute Ladies Rowing Club were intentionally distanced. Despite the extensive newspaper coverage of the Institute announcing the formation of the ladies club, providing clubrooms on Railways land and releasing its senior management to name new boats for the club, the Institute severed all ties to the club in 1933 – a mere two years after formation. The Ladies Club was then even obliged to rename itself to the Riverside Club to remove any hint of connection to the Institute. The Railways Rowing Club (as it was renamed) continued, initially without any interest in rowing and confined to male membership. It did not survive long.

A new male Railways Institute Rowing Club started in 1947<sup>24</sup>. This new club had no interest in celebrating a possible connection to its female counterpart club of only a few years earlier, nor to acknowledge even a remote linkage to The Barcarolle – which had possibly been the most successful rowing club in the state. In 1957, the male club barred women from entering the boat shed as their presence would be an embarrassment to male rowers. And by a more curious coincidence, it also renamed itself the Riverside Club in 1977 when the association with the Institute was again cut.

Typical of many South Australian clubs after 1940, which regrettably included Torrens Rowing Club, women were shunned as rowing members and shunted instead to their expected supportive role of social butterflies serving tea and biscuits. South Australian women's rowing had entered a 40 year stagnation.

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Competitive women's rowing during these decades deserves much greater recognition than that received. Innovative, formative, revolutionary and exciting are all accurate descriptors that should instead be applied to this forgotten period.

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Only the more significant references are listed below. All are from South Australian press except as listed.

<sup>1</sup> Evening Journal 1/5/1907 p2

<sup>2</sup> The Journal 14/3/1913 p5

<sup>3</sup> Evening Journal 18/8/1896 p4

<sup>4</sup> Observer 27/4/1907 p22

<sup>5</sup> The Express and Telegraph 30/12/1910 p2

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> The Journal 28/2/1913 p2

<sup>8</sup> The Express and Telegraph 7/9/1916 p4

<sup>9</sup> South Australian Register 6/10/1900 p12

<sup>10</sup> Observer 27/4/1907 p29

<sup>11</sup> The Register 14/9/1914 p5

<sup>12</sup> The Register News-Pictorial 29/11/1929 p24

<sup>13</sup> Western Mail (West Australia) 25/4/1929 p34

<sup>14</sup> Observer 23/11/1929 p49

<sup>15</sup> The Advertiser 15/8/1930 p14

<sup>16</sup> The Advertiser and Register 6/3/1931 p7

<sup>17</sup> The Advertiser 15/8/1930 p14

<sup>18</sup> Western Mail (West Australia) 25/4/1929 p34

<sup>19</sup> Chronicle 12/6/1930 p65

<sup>20</sup> The Advertiser 9/9/1929 p10

<sup>21</sup> The Advertiser 27/11/1931 p12

<sup>22</sup> Ibid

<sup>23</sup> The Advertiser 22/1/37 p12 30/4/36 p13 14/1/38 p9

<sup>24</sup> One club, three names: the history of Riverside Rowing Club Adelaide South Australia, Hugh Orr, 2011.