

In honour of Pam Stone OAM JP

Howard Jones OAM journalist, author, historian and friend

I'm honoured to be asked to speak at this celebration of Pam Stone's life.

As well as the family members, many of you here will have known Pam much longer than I.

Fortunately, her life story is written up in the Stone Family website – and what a life of 93 years it was.

I won't try to summarise the splendid biography – you can google it - but I will mention a few things that shine a light on Pam in different ways.

My connection began in February 1985 as a reporter meeting a lady councillor who that year astonished Wodonga by becoming its first female mayor.

It took Wodonga 110 years of local government to achieve that!

Mark Mulcahy was the council reporter in 1985 and I spoke to him this week.

He recalled that in the 1980s the city had an "old guard" of middle-aged to elderly councillors, mainly farmers.

They were determined not to let any woman become mayor. They did block Pam until 1985, and even then she only won by 5-4.

Mark recalls: "As mayor, Pam succeeded in smoothing things over at the council, because she was easy-going and eventually won them over. Unusually, she was also very popular as Mayor with the staff."

Pam and Betty McLean did make a lot of progress with getting council services for women and children. They were particularly concerned to help under-privileged people, both having been battlers themselves as young stay-at-home mums.

I can't mention Pam and Betty without mentioning their close friend Jean Whitla – the **Three Wise Women** of Wodonga, who followed their stars and went on overseas holidays together with Bob McLean and Harold Mair.

Jean has put down Pam's success in lobbying for education institutions – university, TAFE down to pre-schools – to Pam's **persistence and intelligence**. I think a bit of **charm** came into it as well.

Of course, Pam was no stranger to fighting bureaucracies, as evidenced by her fight in the 1970s for widows like herself to obtain their husband's pension and superannuation.

My wife Hazel got to know Pam in her 70s, after she had moved to Albury. They met weekly with two of three other friends (a former headmistress and a police inspector) at the Commercial Club for lunch.

Hazel says: "Pam was very well informed not just about Albury and Wodonga but about world affairs. She followed the news closely every day.

"At the same time, she was a good cook. She would smack her lips and would tell us what's she'd made for dinner last night, and perhaps give us the recipe.

"Given her experience as a struggling housewife and widow with a family she believed young mothers should be shown how to make nutritious meals that would also save them money.

"We had a bit of fun at the Commercial Club. Pam always bought raffle tickets for the meat raffles and didn't like it if she never won a chook or a ham... like I did once."

Funny stories? "Well, there was the time we drove out of the club and she hit a ute. Pam gave up driving after going the wrong way around a new traffic island. "Oh, that concrete thing wasn't there the last time we came," she said.

Naturally, Pam always spoke a lot about her family – Shane, Terry and Susan and the grandchildren Jack and Madeline.

As a reporter, I found her enormously brave after Terry's tragic death. And I've learned how brave she was after Les died and after the loss of two stillborn daughters.

For a good 15 years from 1977 to 1992, Pam's life was dominated by a non-stop run of council, committee and corporation board meetings. As a Justice of the Peace, she sat often on the Wodonga bench. Far from being bored with all the debate and drama, she thrived on it.

One incident I remember from when Pam was planning chairperson. The town planners had advised the new Wodonga Plaza extensions had to have baby-change facilities. Bob Crosby objected: "If we had to change our kids' nappies, we did it on the back of a ute!"

To conclude.... it's now almost 50 years since Les was Mayor and the Albury-Wodonga growth centre started.

I have a photograph of the historic meeting in 1973 with Whitlam, Askin and Hamer inaugurating the project.

There were 30 politicians and bureaucrats sat around a table in the Albury Civic Centre, not one of them a woman! Not even a tea lady.

How times have changed!

Pam lived to see two other women become Mayor of Wodonga. Since 2000, we've had women MPs in Indi and Farrer, and several women MPs at State level in Victoria. We've had women State premiers across Australia, and a female Prime Minister.

It was Pam Stone and pioneering women like her that made this possible. I'm so glad Wodonga named the Pam Stone Park to honour her memory.

I will leave you with what Jean Whitla told the ABC in August.

"Pam Stone was one of the best things that happened to Wodonga because **she made us all think**, and from the thinking came support and action."

Thank you.