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Inaugural Member Society of the Genealogical Society of Vic.

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## THE AUSTRALIAN WOMEN'S LAND ARMY OR AWLA

The Land Army. Why?, When?, Who?, What did they do?

Well, it was WW2 and it was 1942, the War was into it's 3<sup>rd</sup> year, the end was not in sight and farmers of all kinds were desperate for help because so many of the usual regular and seasonal farm labour force were just not available any more, having enlisted in the country's fighting forces.

I emphasise Land Army because many people confuse our name with the A.W.A.S (Australian Women's Army Service) which was in fact part of the regular Australian Army – as was the W.A.A.F. and the W.R.A.N. (for Air Force and Navy Women) while we, who were called Land Army were employed by "Manpower", a Government Department for the civilian workforce in Munitions and also finding workers for land jobs or keeping men on the farms even if they wished to join the Fighting Forces.

The Country Women's Association and some other Australian groups had already recruited a few women to help any farmers who were prepared to employ them and though the Government was being pressured on all sides to officially form a women's farm workforce, it steadfastly resisted – "Women couldn't physically do men's work!!" it said. It just wasn't the done thing 60 years ago and today women in the workforce, whether in town or country, married or single, are taken for granted, it's the norm and probably difficult to understand in today's world that it was ever a No- No. However it was a fact then and our politicians in 1942 were the slowest to realize and agree, women land workers must indeed, become a reality. Somehow – and I've forgotten why or how it happened, the Australian Women's Land Army began. Also, by 1942 I was 18 and feeling the need to do my bit, but how? I was also needed at home and enjoying seasonal outdoor work with my Dad who had contract picking and pruning on other blocks plus our own – so the Land Army appealed to me, especially if I could be permitted to come home for those two seasons each year, so I applied, as did my friend Ruth who also lived on a dried fruit block and was needed to help with picking and pruning the vines. We were both accepted and granted the above request, starting our big adventure about August 1942. We were sent to the Flax Mill at Riddell's Creek – wherever was that? Actually on the Bendigo line near Macedon, so it didn't seem like the end of the earth – but our first night did – we were put in a dormitory with 20 other girls whose language combined with the terrible noises and galloping along the wooden upstairs verandah outside our window, did bring concern and fear to us, thankfully the awful language ceased and we got used to the possums.

I've told you why? and when? but who? and what did we do? You might think it was a country girl's job, but no – most girls came from the city to whom the idea of country life on a farm was idyllic – a few found it was in fact hard work and didn't stay, but most of us loved it, in spite of some difficulties. A few were country girls like us, plus one I knew of from Lalbert and one from Kerang. What did we do? There was seasonal work on orchards and vineyards, Flax Mills needed lots of girls all the time, piggeries and poultry farms, the Werribee Research Farm, vegetable farms, dairies, dry and irrigated farms and some girls became Herd Testers. We learned to drive a tractor, harness and drive horses. A few girls worked at Koraleigh and Tresco, many found a husband so remained country girls.

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