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ABC Radio Rural Woman of the Year Awards

(1994 - 1997)

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Summary

The ABC Radio Rural Woman of the Year Awards were established in 1994 as an initiative to recognise the achievements and valuable contribution that women make to rural communities and primary industry. Journalist Lisa Palu organised an event in Queensland that went national for four years.

In 2000 the awards were relaunched with government support. The Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation (RIRDC) supports the award.

Details

I heard for years the stories of my Italian grandmother having to cook three hot meals a day for gangs of cane cutters – maybe twenty men working on our farm at one time. Yet she never appeared on the legal paperwork, her name wasn't on the title and her contribution was never recognised. I hope that doesn't happen to my generation of females.

– Lisa Palu, *ABC Rural Reporter*, 1995.

The process of writing women out of Australian agricultural history is not only a case of faulty memory; it was official policy. After 1891, the Victorian census no longer registered farm wives as 'engaged in agricultural pursuits,' because to do so created an unwanted impression 'that women were in the habit of working in the fields', as they did in so-called 'old world', but 'certainly not in Australia'. [1] Needless to say, the mere act of refusing to count women's 'agricultural pursuits' did not stop them from following them. It just meant that official records of them doing so weren't kept. Despite volumes of anecdotal evidence to the contrary, the official story was that Australian women did not work in agriculture.

A century and two waves of feminism later, Margaret Alston found the official story to be no more revealing. In the 1991 Australian census, almost twice as many men as women were recorded as engaged in the agricultural industry, despite Alston's extensive research in New South Wales suggesting, nay screaming, otherwise. Women's work on farms, according to Alston, continued to be 'discounted, devalued, and certainly not recorded'. [2]

Enter ABC radio rural reporter for the Wide Bay/Burnett River region, Lisa Palu. Travelling around rural Queensland in the early 1990s chasing stories, it was impossible for her to ignore the importance of women's contributions to agriculture in that state. It was also impossible for her to ignore the reluctance of most women, at town or industry forums, to speak up and offer an opinion. She asked one group of women why this was so; why they 'didn't get up and have their say'. Their responses were variations on a theme. 'They felt that they weren't valued,' she said, 'and that their opinions weren't worthwhile, that the men would ridicule them if they stood up and gave their point of view.' [3] As far as Lisa could see, it wasn't their opinions that were the problem, it was the level of their self esteem. Women were important contributors in rural economies, but the value of their contributions was under appreciated and ignored. Something needed to be done to encourage them to speak up and support was required to amplify their voices.

At the same time that Lisa Palu was developing an understanding of the problem in Queensland, rumblings of protest at the lack of acknowledgement accorded to rural women were being felt around the nation. A landmark conference was held in Melbourne in 1994 when the International Women in Agriculture Conference was held in Melbourne. 800 rural and regional women from around the world congregated to discuss issues of common concern in a global context. Two new national rural women's organisations were growing in strength: Australian Women in Agriculture and the Foundation for Australian Agricultural Women. State based rural women's networks were taking shape, with Victoria the first cab off the rank in 1987.

Queensland's Rural Women's Network was established in 1993, around the same time that Lisa Palu began to promote the idea of an award to recognise the role and contributions of women in rural and regional communities. With the support of the Queensland network, she approached her supervisor at ABC Radio's Country Hour in Queensland, Edwina Clowse, who offered unqualified endorsement of the idea. The ABC Rural Department, with strong support from the National Editor, Lucy Broad, expanded the state based Queensland award to a national audience.

The ABC Radio Australian Rural Woman of the Year Award was inaugurated in 1994 with the multiple aims of:

recognising the role and contribution of rural women,
raising awareness of these roles and contributions in the wider community,
providing opportunities to raise issues of concern to rural women,
empowering women to develop the skills and confidence to further contribute to their communities and industries.

A feature of the award was the ABC Radio Leadership Seminar for all regional winners. Participants came together for two and a half days to attend workshops on leadership, team work, presentation and media skills. For the women, whether they went on to be the national winner was immaterial; the value of the seminar and the opportunities for networking that it presented ensured that they all came away winners.[4]

The first ABC Radio Australian Rural Woman of the Year Award was announced on July 1st 1994 as a highlight of the International Women in Agriculture Conference in Melbourne. South Australian cereal and sheep farmer, Deborah Theile was the inaugural winner. She was followed in 1995 by Robyn Treadwell from Birdwood Downs in the Kimberley region of Western Australia, then Barbara Scott of Coonabarabran in New South Wales in 1996 and Jane Bennett of Elizabeth Town in Tasmania in 1997. All of them, in different ways, have had their lives transformed by the award. All have felt a responsibility to ensure that they use whatever benefit they gained as winners to transform the lives of other rural women. As the inaugural winner, Deb Theile, said, 'One can take opportunities and one can create opportunities, I believe in doing both, but I feel very strongly that the greatest part of creating opportunities is to create it for others.'[5]

Jane Bennett was the last woman to receive the 'ABC' version of the award. ABC radio decided it needed to direct its attention towards rural youth and the Australian government decided to bring the award under its administrative arm. After a

short hiatus, the Rural Woman of the Year Award returned in 2000 in a new format, funded by the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation, with a view to focusing on the future, while acknowledging past achievements. Nominees are now required to propose a project, for which they will receive a significant bursary. Selection is based on a strong record of achievement as well as an impressive project proposal. [6]

Between 1994 and 1997, one hundred and sixty-eight women across the country were given the title 'Rural Woman of the Year' at a regional, state or national level. To be recognised this way was an important acknowledgement, not only for them as individuals, but for all women in rural communities. Without the commitment and initiative of women such as Lisa Palu, Edwina Clowse and Lucy Broad at the ABC, the award would never have been celebrated, and that important step of being written back into history might not have been taken.

But, as always, it's up to the actors to see what happens next. As Lynne Johnstone, the 1994 state winner from Western Australia observed when launching the 1995 award:

The ABC has taken the first step in highlighting the role of women in agriculture – the next is up to us. Nothing will change unless we make it change and women will no longer accept that change will happen of its own accord. We need the three Rs of agriculture: Recognition, Representation and Resources. [7]

This exhibition celebrates those women in agriculture who took the challenge of taking the next step; the ABC Radio Rural Women of the Year of 1994 – 1997.

1. Census 1891, *Victorian Parliamentary Papers*, 1893, vol. 3, no. 9, p. 192. [Return to text](#)
2. Margaret Alston, *Women on the Land: The Hidden Heart of Rural Australia*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 1995, pp 3-4. [Return to text](#)
3. Lisa Palu interviewed by Ros Bowden in the Women of the Land Oral History Project, 1995, National Library of Australian Oral History and Folklore Section, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn1335934> [Return to text](#)
4. Lucy Broad, 'The Untapped Resource', Margaret Alston (ed.) *Australian Rural Women Towards 2000*, Centre for Rural Social Research, Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga, 1998, pp. 61-65. [Return to text](#)
5. Webpage of the ABC Radio Australian Rural Woman of the Year Award, <http://www.abc.net.au/rural/rwoty/default.htm>, [accessed 2010-12-06] [Return to text](#)
6. Webpage of the RIRDC Rural Women's Award, <http://www.ruralwomensaward.gov.au/TheAward.htm> [accessed 2010-12-06] [Return to text](#)
7. Lynne Johnstone, quoted in Ros Bowden, *Women of the Land: Stories of Australia's Rural Women as told to Ros Bowden*, ABC Books, Sydney, 1995, p. 6. [Return to text](#)

Published resources

Site Exhibition

Brilliant Ideas and Huge Visions: ABC Radio Australian Rural Women of the Year - 1994-1997, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2011, <http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/rwya/rwya-home.html>

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