



The Misses Stewart: Seamstresses of the Hawkesbury

A HAWKESBURY REGIONAL MUSEUM INFORMATION SHEET



The collection of clothing and accessories known as *The Misses Stewart Collection* was donated to Hawkesbury Historical Society and Regional Museum by Mrs Mary Avern, a long-time friend of the Stewart sisters, over a period of three decades beginning in 1981.

The following information, provided by Mrs Avern, can be read as an account by someone who knew both the Stewarts well and had an interest in Hawkesbury heritage.

Mary recalled a story told by her grandmother about the Peace Ball held at Richmond School of Arts to celebrate the end of the First World War.

'When the Great War came to an end on November 11th 1918 there wasn't a town or village in the country that hadn't felt the impact of the war. Peace celebrations broke out everywhere, including the Hawkesbury

district where locals celebrated at the Richmond School of Arts peace Ball.

Myra and Ivy Stewart arrived in the mid afternoon by horse and cart at my grandmother's house in Windsor Street, Richmond, where the Aldi supermarket now stands. They came inside to take refreshments and rest before it was time to prepare for the ball. Dressed in the beautiful frocks they had made themselves, Myra and Ivy attended the ball with a group of friends including my father, Arthur Sullivan.

They returned to stay for the night and then made the day long journey back home to Mountain Lagoon the next day. Myra was 25 at the time; her sister Ivy was 21.'

Though born in Sydney, the Stewart girls were brought up on their family property *St Anne's* at Mountain Lagoon, near Bilpin and spent the rest of their lives in the

Hawkesbury. Their father and grandfather were pioneers of the fruit growing industry in that region and contributed greatly to what became a significant farming community.

The Misses Stewart Collection includes garments and accessories made for special occasions and everyday wear, such as a hand-sewn man's calico shirt, typically worn during the day as a work shirt and at night to sleep in. The shirt shows evidence of patching and mending, most likely carried out by the young Myra and Ivy.

Even in remote communities, there were occasions to dress up for, and these provided the Misses Stewart with the opportunity to produce garments like a brocade waistcoat, also in the collection and possibly worn by their father, Wilton. The collection also includes a number of mourning garments from the Victorian,



Edwardian and later eras, believed to have been hand made by the Stewart women and worn to mourn the death of their father and grandparents. Uniformly black, reflecting the wearers grief, they feature the boned waistlines and high necked collars of the period.

By contrast, the shorter hemlines and looser silhouettes of later mourning dresses show how two World Wars and the Great Depression brought significant social changes and with them, the relaxing of the restrictions imposed by Victorian ideas of propriety. Having lived through tough times, the sisters knew how to make ends meet. Recycling was common practice, including the removal of decorative trimmings from one garment to be reused on another, as well as mending, patching and

restyling existing clothing. Even scraps such as calico from old flour bags could be put to good use, nothing went to waste.

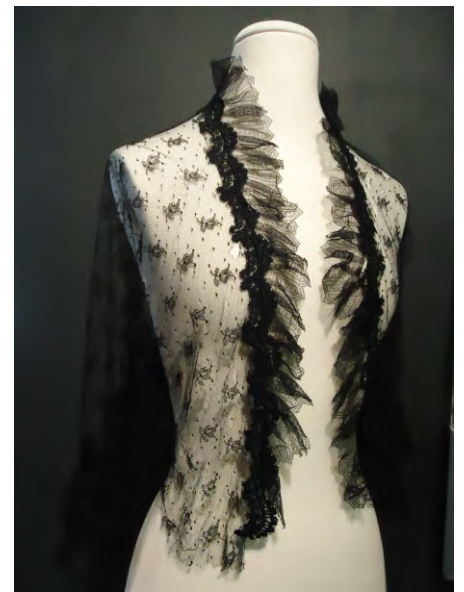
Along with tatting (lace-making) and beading, mending was a skill in itself, requiring meticulous needlework. The sisters may not have been able to purchase new clothes and accessories but they could bring uniqueness and beauty to their hand-made pieces.

When their father died, the girls and their mother, Blanche, moved to a small timber cottage in Chapel Street, Richmond. It was there that they began creating garments and accessories for the prestigious Sydney department stores, David Jones and Farmers.

Working by the light of a kerosene lamp, they knitted, crocheted and sewed everything from baby's clothes and lace trimmings to ties, belts and gentlemen's waistcoats, travelling to town once a month to deliver their wares. They also sewed for The Patsy, a popular haberdashery in Windsor Street, Richmond.

The sisters never married and after the death of their mother they continued to produce beautiful hand-made pieces to sell.

Soon after Ivy's death in 1976, Myra developed Alzheimer's disease and lived in a nursing home until her death in 1978.



Images:
Front: Myra and Ivy Stewart. c.1960. Local Studies Collection, Hawkesbury Library Service, Local Studies Collection, Hawkesbury Library Service
Back, top left: The Stewart family at their property 'St Anne's', Mountain Lagoon. c.1920. Local Studies Collection, Hawkesbury Library Service, Local Studies Collection, Hawkesbury Library Service
Back, top right: (to be determined by placement):: Myra and Ivy Stewart with their grandparents at 'St Anne's' c.1920, Hawkesbury Library Service, Local Studies Collection, Hawkesbury Library Service
Back, lower left: Ladies crochet jumper, c. early 20th century, silk, collection Hawkesbury Historical Society
Back, lower centre: Bodice, c. late 19th century, satin, net and lace with gathered sleeves, collection Hawkesbury Historical Society
Back, lower right: Bodice, c. late 19th century, embroidered lace, front and sleeves finished with heavy lace and gathered net edging, collection Hawkesbury Historical Society