



One of Playford Library's local history displays

Local interest re-animates local history

Linda Allery, local history officer

Until 1993, the local history room of the Elizabeth Public Library had been locked and unstaffed for nearly ten years. With the closure of one of the branch libraries, I was redeployed as the local history officer. My first priority was to clear the many boxes piled in the room and left unsorted for several years. My second was to encourage members of the community to become actively involved in the local history service as volunteers.

Currently there are twenty-four volunteers undertaking projects such as indexing the local newspapers and photographic collections to the library computer system. This work has enabled the public to make local history enquiries through the library's On-line Public Access Catalogue and has created a greater awareness of the local history service.

Other local history activities have included two oral history projects. The first, a \$4000 grant received by the 'Australia Remembers' Community Grants, enabled ten oral histories of people involved in the Second World War to be recorded. Another project, funded by the Council, included the recording of twenty-two oral histories of early Elizabeth residents. Recognising the huge amount of interest from the latter, I compiled a book from the transcripts of the recordings, *Elizabeth: from dusty plain to royal names*.

Another Elizabeth Public Library project, *Migrant heritage places in Australia*, aimed to learn more about Australia's migrant heritage, and to assist migrant communities in identifying their own heritage places. Elizabeth was one of only four areas in Australia to participate in this Heritage Commission pilot project.

Schools are encouraged to visit the local and family history centre. The community information officer and I give school children a tour of the council chambers where they take part in a mock council meeting all dressed up in council robes. This is followed by a presentation on local history and the council services. If it is not possible for a school to visit the centre, the centre visits the school.

During 1994, the International Year of the Family, I began expanding the local history collection to include fam-

ily history resources. For the people of the northern community of Adelaide this was a much-needed service. Genealogy is becoming one of the most popular hobbies in recent times. For many, before their research could begin, it was necessary to travel many miles to research establishments, not all of which offered free research services. This meant family research was limited to a minority. Through the family history collection it was hoped to turn this around and make family research available to all. The family history collection meets the city council's strategic plan objective, 'to recognise culture as an integral part of the city's character.'

A large collection of 'self-help' tools was gathered together from the library's main collection. The family history collection proved to be a popular addition to the local history service from the outset. Requests for a genealogy club came within the first month of establishment. Seventy people attended the first meeting with numbers varying from month to month. The club meets twice a month with one meeting being for guest speakers and the other to help people with their research. Officially, the club is now known as the Playford Family History Society. Through training and the combined efforts of the club's many members we now have an excellent advice and referral service.

Community support has been fantastic, especially with donations. The *International genealogy index* on microfiche was donated by the Church of Jesus Christ and Latter Day Saints. The *Index* lists births, christenings and marriages and carries many millions of names from around the world. The local newspaper, *The News Review Messenger*, donated a microfiche printer reader and many of our patrons have donated books and magazines.

In 1995 *Family search*, the international genealogy index on CD-ROM was purchased giving researchers the opportunity to search 300 million names world-wide. Copies of *Australian births, deaths and marriages* on CD-ROM and microfiche were also purchased.

As the demand grew, the public requested further specialist services. Internet access is now available for \$2.00 per hour and scanning of documents and photographs is also

▶ available for a small fee. *St Catherine's House (London) birth and marriage index 1837-1902* was purchased and is also available for \$2.00 per hour. Our clients have been more than happy to pay a small charge to have these resources available close to home.

Over the last few years the service has grown to such an extent that three full-time volunteers help out with the one hundred or more weekly local and family history enquiries. The local and family history collection is advertised through regular community newsletters and the local paper.

The development of local and family history activities has changed the service offered from that of collecting significant documents to a more interactive community-based activity.

All the hard work was worth it when the Family History Centre won a Commendation in the 1996 National Awards for Innovation in Local Government in the category 'Use of information technology in local government'. The judges' report states 'This project gives an innovative example of how local government can identify and respond to information technology issues originating from the community.'

In 1997 the City of Elizabeth and the City of Munno Para amalgamated. A service review of both local history services was undertaken to make a decision about the future. Both services were not without access problems. Elizabeth's was located on the first floor of the library, accessible only via a steep staircase, and Munno Para's was located in the library workroom. The addition of family history services and the library being in a major shopping centre meant that the Elizabeth local and family history service dealt with more enquiries than Munno Para local history service. The decision was made to relocate the Munno Para collection to



Members of the local community enjoying Playford Library's facilities

Elizabeth. The relocation of council staff left half of the City of Elizabeth's council offices vacant. The Playford Local and Family History Service moved into this area which is at the entrance of the main shopping centre, attracting many passing by. Another bonus was a fire-proof strongroom enabling the safe storage of Playford's local history items.

More and more people are expressing an interest in finding out about their family and local history. South Australia's City of Playford is meeting this need by providing many new resources to assist in their research. For further information contact Linda Allery, local history officer, telephone 08 8254 0343. ■

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