

Marilyn Donn,

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Australian History. Thursday.

ORAL HISTORY ASSIGNMENT.

INTERVIEWEE - Mary Louisa Corke (nee Pike) M.B.E.,  
65 Abermain Street,  
PELAW MAIN. N.S.W. 2327  
Retired Matron of Kurri Kurri  
District Hospital.

14th October, 1986.

Mary Louisa Corke (nee Pike) M.B.E., was born at Warialda, N.S.W., on 16th January, 1916. Her parents were James and Louisa Florence Pike. Her father was a grazier and the family lived on their sheep and wheat property called "Glen View", 15 miles from Warialda. Mary had four brothers and three sisters. They all had a very happy childhood and during the depression years considered themselves very fortunate because they had their own sheep, cattle, fowls, vegetable garden and fruit which enabled them to live very well. When Mary was 16 years old she was a patient in the local hospital. She developed a great admiration for the nursing staff and decided that she would like to become a nurse. However, Mary's father was very strict and would not allow her to leave home until she was 21 years old.

Mary Louisa Pike began her nursing career at a private hospital in Quirindi N.S.W. in 1937, where she was employed as a Probationary Nurse (today's equivalent of a Nurse Aide) for one year. Nurses were supposed to work an 8 hour day but 12 to 14 hours work was the reality.

From Quirindi Mary spent one year in a private hospital at Uralla N.S.W., where the work was equally as hard. From an advertisement in the local newspaper, Mary applied for a Trainee Nurse position at Kurri Kurri District Hospital and commenced her general training there on 21st January, 1939.

The general hospital in Lang Street, Kurri Kurri had been established in 1910, after residents of the town saw the need to accommodate seriously injured patients after a mining disaster in the mid 1900's

had overtaxed the facilities of the small cottage hospital. All mineworkers subscribed 3d per week to the hospital for its establishment and running costs. The mineworkers looked upon Kurri Kurri District Hospital as their hospital and gave their support willingly.

In 1939 nurses at the hospital worked 4 shifts - morning, afternoon, night and a broken duty. A Trainee Nurse did four years very intensive and extensive general training. Their working day was officially 8 hours often extending to 12 hours on duty. Extended working hours were often required as a nurse was always on call with Kurri Kurri District Hospital's own ambulance service, which was frequently called to local mining accidents of varying severity.

Nurses attended night lectures given by Doctors in the nurses' off-duty time. Both nurses and patients' meals were similar. There was plenty of meat which was plentiful and cheap, porridge, soup, boiled or baked dinner and sweets. The pit whistle which sounded at 6.55 a.m. was the signal for nurses to serve breakfasts. If patients preferred an egg for breakfast this was provided by their families. During the war soup was taken from the midday menu and served for morning tea because of the rationing of tea and sugar. Because the evening meal was rather meagre additional food was usually provided for patients by their relatives. The evening meal for nurses consisted of meat, beetroot with bread and butter.

The hospital had Egg Days on Fridays when members of the community were asked to donate eggs which were used to cook puddings and cakes for patients. Community support was always forthcoming particularly during the depression when gifts of eggs and fresh vegetables were greatly appreciated.

When Mary commenced her general training her salary was 13/6 per week from which she paid 7/6 for board. At Kurri Kurri District Hospital Mary was promoted to Ward Sister on 29th January, 1943, to Deputy Matron on 1st September, 1947 and became Matron on 15th December, 1960. Preceding her retirement on 18th January, 1981, Mary was receiving a salary of \$250.00 per week. The current salary paid to a Nursing Administrator is \$700.00 per week.

Mary married Mervyn William Corke, a widower with three children, on 14th March, 1951. Mervyn was an Electrical Fitter at Richmond Main Colliery.

From the commencement of Mary's nursing career in 1937 and her retirement in 1981, she has seen many changes. As Matron, Mary was in charge of the Nursing Staff, Wardsmen and Domestic Staff until 1966; a large workload. In the early days when domestic staff had their one day off per week nurses filled in for them in the kitchens preparing food and washing dishes. In 1937 sulphur drugs were being used in medicine. Nursing was very hard work and it was often good nursing which made the difference between life and death for a patient. Doctors only were allowed to take a patient's blood pressure, even though nurses were taught how to do so. Penicillin drugs were a great breakthrough and the first

penicillin injection given to a patient in Kurri Kurri District Hospital was in 1943.

Nurses' benefits now include not having to attend lectures in their own time, less overtime, being allowed to live out and part-time employment available for Sisters and Nurses. Nurses now have 6 weeks holidays per year instead of 3 because they are expected to work public holidays.

Many building changes took place at Kurri Kurri District Hospital when Mary was Matron. In 1961 a new Obstetrics Ward opened and in 1962 the original Male Ward became a Nursing Home Unit. A Children's Ward was constructed in 1970 followed by a new Operating Theatre and Outpatients' Department in 1974. The Intensive Care Unit opened in 1976.

Some of the changes which have saddened Mary over the years have been the change from the professional look of nurses' starched uniforms, caps and veils and her view that one of the most important aspects of nursing, that of bedside nursing, is disappearing. Mary believes that the nurse "who rubbed your back, made your pillows comfortable and gave you a cold drink" is the one patients remember when they recover.

In summing up her nursing career Mary felt that people in her age group have seen the best years in nursing; worked hard, cared for people and were cared for in return. Mary and her nurses could never have gotten through without the love and consideration of their patients and the people of this district. Mary loved every minute of her 44 years in nursing and always had a wonderful relationship with patients and a good working relationship with doctors.

### ADDEDUM.

Following is additional written information provided by Mary regarding changes during her nursing career.

Nurses changed from working a 48 hour week with one day off, to 40 hours per week with two days off. There was more freedom in the Nurses' Home with lights out at 12 midnight instead of 10.30 p.m. Nurses were freed from many extra duties such as serving meals to patients, having to stoke the hospital boiler at night, making swabs and dressings, cleaning the sterilizer, sterilizing operating instruments and trays.

When the verandahs, doors and windows at Kurri Kurri District Hospital were gauzed, this saved nurses from the tedious task of rolling up 26 mosquito nets in each ward before commencing duty each morning. Torches replaced outdated kerosene lamps for use during night duty. Disposable syringes were a great improvement.

A seamstress was employed to make and mend nurses' uniforms. This job had been previously undertaken by Red Cross volunteers and nurses on sick leave who were recuperating.

When Mary was Deputy Matron she issued stores each morning to the wards and kitchen. She also issued tablets, ointments and stocked mixtures to the wards. A chemist came to the hospital for 1 hour each day and issued special medicines and drugs.

On 19th September, 1968, Mary became an Honorary Member of the N.S.W. College of Nursing and she was awarded her M.B.E. in June, 1980 for Health and Community Service.