



THE MASONIC HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

ETHEL LANG. Actress

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Two of the first actors of note on Australian Radio were Ethel Lang and her husband, James Brunton Gibb. In 1924 on 2FC they were broadcasting short dramatic and comedy sketches each lasting about ten minutes. Another well known performer at the time was Wilfred Thomas. These shows were first broadcast from a studio on the roof garden of Farmer and Coy., the elegant Sydney department store. Naturally the station's call-sign was 2FC. In 1927, when Farmer's dissociated its broadcasting activities from its other business activities, a separate company, 2FC limited was formed and worked from premises above Market street next to Her Majesty's Theatre. In time there were two studios, whose walls were packed with seaweed and hung with tapestry drapes to deaden noise from the street below. During broadcasting the windows had to remain shut and their curtains closed providing a rather claustrophobic atmosphere. There was another A class company, Broadcasters (Sydney) Limited, operating at this time and both 2FC and 2BL were incorporated into the New South Wales Broadcasting Company. In 1932 the incorporated company was nationalised and the ABC, more or less as we know it, was formed, still working from the Market Street premises.

Ethel Lang was born on 8th June 1902 at Surry Hills in Sydney. Her father was employed in the building industry as a painter and decorator. Australia was in a depression at the time and as work was very scarce her father went to South Africa on a five year contract. Ethel Lang and her mother then went to live with her grandmother, also in Surry Hills. When she was six weeks old her uncle, a scene shifter with J. C. Williamsons, recommended her for the part of a baby in a new play with Bland Holt called "Flying Colours." Bland Holt was a great believer in reality and a doll would not do. Ethel was on stage for three minutes being carried on wrapped up in a shawl and when unwrapped she kicked her legs and waved her arms, thoroughly captivating the ladies in the audience. The ooh's and the ah's could be clearly heard and Ethel Lang says this is how she earned her first thirty bob.

When Ethel was seven the great San Francisco earthquake occurred and her father went straight from South Africa to America looking for work. Her Uncle Walter again found a part for her as Napoleon's son in a play called "The Royal Divorce" which she played after only 14 days rehearsal. At this time at school in Ashfield she was performing in school plays and recalls when she was playing Snow White, a lady in the audience was heard to remark, "That the little girl is supposed to have a father but no one has ever seen him", a comment on social mores of the time.

When Ethel was 9 she went with her mother to America to meet her father for the first time. After more than two years away her mother became homesick and sailed for Australia with Ethel, arriving here two weeks before the outbreak of World War 1. After the Lusitania was sunk her father advised her mother not to return to America because of the war situation but he became very ill and died during the war period so they never met again.

At the age of 17 Ethel Lang met James Brunton Gibb who had returned from the war and whom she was later to marry, but more of him later. Ethel and Jim worked together in concert and recital work and were married in 1923, their first son Peter being born in 1924. They were later to have three more children, Wendy, Barbara and David.

Ethel Lang was one of the ABC's Radio Drama's first leading ladies playing many roles during the 1930s including Shakespearean roles such as Portia in "The Merchant of Venice" and the role of Lady Macbeth. These plays were presented on Sunday afternoons, sometimes played straight to air and at other times pre-recorded. These recordings would have been on master disc. Other actors of the time were Walter Pym, Julius Knight and Charles Lawrence who went on to read Cinesound News and also conducted community singing on 2UE during the 1930s

Peter Brunton Gibb was under contract to 2GB at the age of 9 and showed a lot of promise but he joined the air force at 19, became a pilot and after the war he pursued another career and did not resume acting. Barbara Brunton had a successful acting career and married Stuart Revill, a Sydney Morning Herald journalist. Wendy Gibb also acted successfully and is well remembered for role as Cathy McAllister in "Sons of Matthew" which also starred Michael Pate, Tommy Burns and John Ewart. The Director of Photography was Bro. Bert Nicholas, a leading Australian cinematographer and some time member of Lodge Centenary, No. 373.. David Brunton Gibb pursued a career in medicine and held the chair of anaesthetics at the University of New South Wales.

For the opening of the Sydney Harbour Bridge in 1932 James Brunton Gibb was asked by the Lord Mayor, Samuel Walder, to write his opening speech. This was then typed by Ethel Lang and they were both invited to sit on the official dais for the ceremony. Ethel Lang recalls seeing the official procession and hearing the announcer, Ossie Anderson, describing the entourage. He remarked that at the rear of the procession there was a man in a military uniform mounted on a horse. After much thought Ossie decided that he must be the Governor's bodyguard. It was, of course, De Groot.

Whilst working at the ABC during the 1930s Ethel Lang also began her first long running radio serial. This was "One Man's Family" on 2SM. She became the leading lady in the series after Nancye Stewart departed. The show was on air 4 nights a week and also starred John Dunne and Dick Fair. Sunday night was called "The Tapestries of Life" and was a historical type of presentation. Monday night was "In Town Tonight", Tuesday night was "One Man's Family" and Wednesday night was "All Over Sydney" and consisted of talks and discussions about parts of Sydney. This ran from the early 1930s until 1938. When her contract expired a further contract was not offered probably because of the uncertain times with war coming.

She was offered a contract with 2GB to play as "The Voice of the Diary" in "Other Women's Diaries" which ran until the outbreak of World War 2 and the birth of her fourth child, David. In the early 1940s Ethel Lang began on 2UW as Aunt Jenny in "Aunt Jenny's Real Life Stories." These were 15 minute episodes and were recorded at the old Columbia Studios at Homebush and the series ran for nearly 20 years. In each episode Aunt Jenny discussed some experience, supposedly from her life with her nephew, Jimmy, played by John Hudson. Each episode began and ended with Aunt Jenny and Jimmy giving a personalised plug for their sponsor, Siren Soap in New South Wales and Velvet Soap in all the other states. It later became Velvet Soap in New South Wales as well. Several promotional trips to capital cities in Australian were made during the run and she particularly remembers that after she made her first air flight a huge crowd was waiting to meet her in Perth. During the 1950s Ethel Lang was also a product personality for "You're on Clover" with George Foster and "Give It A Go" with Jack Davey. She also played in "When a Girl Marries" and "Mary Livingstone M.D." Each of these two series ran for over 2000 episodes.

At this stage in 1961 Ethel and her husband, Jim Brunton Gibb, had decided to take a trip abroad and when she met the soap sponsors over lunch she told them of this plan. A big sigh of relief was heard from the sponsors because apparently with the advent of detergents soap was out the sponsorship was not to be renewed.

From 1944 to 1948 Ethel Lang played Mrs. Lawson in "The Lawsons." It was intended to be a morale booster for the farmers' war efforts. This then became "Blue Hills" in which she first played as the charlady before taking the role of Meg MacArthur when Bebe Scott withdrew because of illness. This ran for 27 years, 5795 episodes, 7 million words, the equivalent of 70 novels and was written for all that time by Gwen Meredith. Blue Hills was written with a fairly strong documentary aspect with issues of the day, particularly rural, being covered. The Chairman of the ABC at the time, Charles Moses, had been asked by the Prime Minister of the day, John Curtin, to present a programme directed at country listeners. Gwen Meredith was commissioned to write about issues like Alcoholics Anonymous, the Good Neighbourhood Council and whether a young man on a station discovering that he had aboriginal blood in his ancestry should marry a white girl. The Lawsons began on 21st February 1944 and became Blue Hills on 25th February 1949. When Blue Hills finished a 27 year run on 30th October 1976 Ethel Lang thought about retiring but she then accepted a two year run in "In Search For Elizabeth" before finally retiring.

In retirement Ethel Lang and Queenie Ashton visited and entertained community groups, nursing homes and hospitals with stories of their long careers. She had also been President of the Actor's Benevolent Fund during the 1940s and 1950s. Following her 90th Birthday in 1992 she was made a Member of the Order of Australia for services to radio and the community. In 1995 a 50th anniversary celebration of the ABC's Rural Department was held in Adelaide with Ethel and Queenie Ashton as the guests of honour and Queenie Ashton sang "Happy Birthday" accompanied on the piano by Ethel Lang.

Ethel Lang died on 1st November 1995 having spent her last years in the Hunters Hill Congregational Retirement Village where she was still entertaining.

Her husband, Rt. Wor. Bro. James Brunton Gibb, a very distinguished freemason had previously died on 28th June 1968.

Peter Brunton Gibb joined Lodge Sydney High School, No. 631 on 12th October 1945, was passed and raised on 9th November 1945 and 8th March 1946. He was installed Worshipful Master in 1957 and called off in 1982.

- Ref: The Golden Age of Radio Drama, 1923-1960.
Richard Lane (1944).
Out of the Bakelite Box,
Jacqueline Kent (1983).
Radio Days, Patti Crocker (1989).
This is the ABC, Inglis (1983).
Recorded conversation of Ethel Lang and
Richard Lane kindly loaned by Barbara Revill.
Paper clippings and personal records again
loaned by her daughter, Barbara Revill.

