

Bread and Dripping

Women tell their stories of the 1930s Great Depression in Australia

Bread and Dripping was made in 1981.

In 2020, this classic of Australian cinema was restored from the original 16mm film materials.



"It was a never-ending round of work for women, there was patching and mending, I can remember sewing patches together to make pants for my little girl."

Information Kit

17 minutes 1981 Australia, © Wimminsfilms

A film by Vic Smith, Margot Nash, Elizabeth Schaffer, Donna Foster and Wendy Brady.

Bread and Dripping was produced with the assistance of the Australian Film Commission and the Women's Film Fund.

Distributed by Ronin Films

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Synopsis

Women tell their stories of the 1930s Great Depression in Australia

In *Bread and Dripping*, four women recount their lives during the bleak years of the economic depression of the 1930s. Tibby Whalan, Eileen Pittman, Beryl Armstrong and Mary Wright describe their struggles to survive and maintain families when faced with unemployment, evictions and hardship. *Bread and Dripping* provides a window into the lives of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous women as they face the challenges of this major economic and social crisis.

Bread and Dripping makes extensive use of archival footage and photographs from the 1930s to present a fascinating insight into the lives of women in Australia. The title, *Bread and Dripping*, refers to a meal of leftover bread soaked in fat and eaten when no other food was available.

The tragedy and humour of the songs sung by the women in the film reflect their experiences of kitchens with empty cupboards and streets filled with both despair and resistance - the songs embody the courage that helped these women and their families survive.

In an era of unexpected global economic and social crisis, listening to four women share their personal recollections of struggle and survival during the Great Depression gives a timely and powerful insight into ways that women experience and shoulder the impacts of social and economic crisis.



"Aboriginal women weren't allowed to get the child endowment nor the baby bonus ... you see they had nothing."

About the women



Eileen Pittman talks about how hard it was for Aboriginal families and remembers daily life in the shanty town of Happy Valley in La Prouse.

" Aboriginal people were hit hard when the Depression was on. They weren't allowed to get the dole. They had to take rations, and they were terrible rations."



Beryl Armstrong reflects on the realities of poverty and the impacts of workplace lockouts and anti-union violence in regional NSW.

"I remember when the policeman came on Christmas Eve, looking for guns, and I showed him in the cupboard, we had no food at all."



Mary Wright recounts the discrimination women faced in the workplace and how they joined together to protest and survive.

"Women were being exploited as cheap labour, the employers were paying them 52% of the male wage and making that much more profit."



Tibby Whalan talks about the daily challenges women faced and reflects on the long term economic impacts of the Great Depression.

"I used to cook in a camp oven. I used to boil the washing up in a kerosene tin after I'd carried the water from the creek."

Film, feminism and telling women's stories

Bread and Dripping was developed in the context of feminism and the increased activity of women in filmmaking in the 1970s and 80s. The Sydney Women's Film Group, which operated out of the Sydney Filmmakers Co-op, was a focal point for discussion around feminism and film. Actively working to support the creation, distribution and exhibition of films made by women that gave voice to women's stories, the group organised workshops that provided women with access to filmmaking skills. While attending a Women's Film Workshop, four young women with little previous experience in filmmaking came together around an idea for a documentary exploring the experience of the Great Depression in Australia from the point of view of women who had lived through it. These women, Vic Smith, Elizabeth Schaffer, Donna Foster and Wendy Brady, formed a production company called Wimminsfilms and applied successfully to the Creative Development Branch of the Australian Film Commission and the Women's Film Fund to develop the documentary that became Bread and Dripping.

Taking the experience of women during the Great Depression as its focus, rather than the experience of men so often represented, research for Bread and Dripping aimed to learn directly from women themselves through their stories of survival and growth in extraordinary times. Through networks of family and friends; interviews conducted with writers and academics such as Kylie Tennant, Nadia Wheatley and Wendy Lowenstein; and in meetings with women who had been active in trade unions and women's organisations from the 1930s, the filmmakers built up a rich picture of women's lives at a time of major economic and social crisis. Eventually the stories shared by four women emerged as representative of the struggles of so many women during the period.

At every stage in the development of Bread and Dripping, filmmaking tasks were shared including the research, fundraising, production and post-production. During filming the roles of director, camera operator, sound recordist and interviewer were rotated across the collective. Many months were spent searching for images and archival footage of women's lives in the 1930s. Margot Nash, who was initially engaged as a professional advisor during filming, went on to take a major role in editing the documentary, becoming part of the Wimminsfilms collective during this period.

Bread and Dripping went on to be shown around the world at national and international film festivals, on television, in schools, trade unions and in community settings around Australia. It continues to be a rare and powerful insight into women's lives. Positioning Bread and Dripping within the context of feminism and the vibrant activity of women in filmmaking in Sydney in the 1970s and 80s gives another layer of meaning to this classic of Australian documentary filmmaking.

The Filmmakers

The film was made by the collective, Wimminfilms - Vic Smith, Margot Nash, Elizabeth Schaffer, Donna Foster and Wendy Brady. The Moving Day song was performed by Carol Ruff and Joe Geia.

A collective approach to the project saw film development and production roles rotated during the project in order to share and build skills and expertise in filmmaking.

Vic Smith completed a BA Honours thesis on women in cinema in 1982. Her film credits include editing assistant, *For Love or Money* (1983) and assistant editor, *Onguard* (1984). She currently works in communication, research and evaluation, with a focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and multicultural communities.

Margot Nash is a filmmaker and academic. Her credits include the feature dramas *Vacant Possession* (1994) and *Call Me Mum* (2005), the experimental shorts *Shadow Panic* (1989) and *We Aim To Please* (1976) and the feature documentaries *For Love Or Money* (1983) and *The Silences* (2015). She is currently an Honorary Associate Teaching and Research at the University of Technology, Sydney.

Elizabeth Schaffer has worked in areas of social justice throughout her career, designing, managing and delivering programs in education, arts, mental health and wellbeing, and evaluation for Indigenous organisations, refugee and migrant support agencies, museums and tertiary and further education institutions.

Wendy Brady became the first identified Aboriginal person to graduate with a PhD in Education from the University of Sydney in 1996. She pursued a successful academic career including as Director of the Ngunnawal Centre, University of Canberra.

Donna Foster completed an arts degree at Sydney College of the Arts and continued to focus on photography.



Festivals and screenings

Melbourne International Film Festival 1982

Wellington International Film Festival 1982

Sydney Filmmakers Co-op, Women in Struggle 1982

Tyneside Film Festival, UK 1983

Chauvel Cinema, NSW 1985

State Film Centre, Hobart 1986

State Film Centre, Victoria 1987

SBS Australia, 1988

Cinema du Reel, International Festival of Documentary Film Paris 1991

Seen and Heard Women's Film Festival, Sydney 2009

Happy Valley: La Perouse in the Depression, La Perouse Museum, 2020

Resources

Bread and Dripping is a useful resource for schools, libraries, universities and TAFE and anyone interested in the study of Australian history, labour history, oral history or women's history. Bread and Dripping is featured on the Australian Screen website as part of a feature on the Great Depression. Education notes are available for free at:

<http://www.australianscreen.com.au/titles/bread-and-dripping/>



"I don't think the Depression ever ended ... there was a boom during the war years but for me the Depression was still on."