THE I.M.B. FIFTY YEARS AGO:

[On April 6th (Easter Sunday) the Illawarra Mutual Building Society will attain its centenary. A commemorative volume, in which some members of this Society had a hand, will have been launched by the time this appears. It includes a general sketch of the Society’s history. Among the materials from which this was compiled were personal reminiscences by Miss Rebe Findlay, who joined the staff of the Society in 1924 and has given it over half a century’s faithful service. Miss Findlay and the I.M.B. Society have kindly given us permission to publish these recollections of a very different Wollongong].

At the end of the year 1922 my family was farewelled from Marshall Mount and we moved to a small farm in Bellevue Road, Figtree, on New Year’s Day 1923.

Having left school at the end of 1922, I helped my brother on the farm because my father took a job at Metal Manufactures. For the summer months he left M.M. and took a job delivering Sharpe’s cordials. One day while he was serving Mrs. Alexander Lang with cordials, she asked him if he knew anyone who would like a position to help her in her home, “Bustle Cottage,” Church Street, Wollongong, while her maid was on a month’s leave. My father suggested that she come and see my sister and me, which she did. I decided I would take the position and I spent January 1924 working with Mrs. Lang and enjoyed every day of it. Mrs. Lang was a lovely lady. I walked from Bellevue Road, Figtree, and back each day—there were very few buses then, and none to suit my working hours.

At the end of the month Miss Scott returned to take up duties again for Mrs. Lang. She was a friend of Mrs. Bob Shipp, a daughter of Mr. Henry Stumbles, the then secretary of the Illawarra Mutual Building Society. Mr. Stumbles was nearing 80 years of age and had no help, except some voluntary help from his son Viv, who worked a few doors away up the street for his brother Mr. Fred Stumbles in an estate agency. Miss Scott heard that he needed an assistant, so she spoke to him for me, and I commenced work with the I.M.B. on 1st March, 1924, assisting Mr. Stumbles.

At that time the financial year ended on the 31st March. At the end of March that year Mr. Viv Stumbles did the balance sheet for his father, but next year I did it. Mr. Stumbles gave me a gold sovereign for doing it, and each Christmas he gave me a sovereign. The office hours then were 10 o’clock to 3 o’clock.

On 9th July 1925 Mr. Stumbles passed away at the age of 79. Mr. William Tubman was appointed Secretary.

The office was then situated where Jens Madsen’s Studios are now (140 Crown Street, Wollongong) upstairs above C. P. Puckey’s chemist shop and overlooking the Commercial Banking Company. The Bank at that time was a small building with a residence attached, and a beautiful lawn on the side with a may bush on the centre of the lawn and wistaria growing on the back fence. When the may and wistaria were blooming the garden was beautiful to look at from the balcony of the I.M.B. Mr. Thomas was the Bank Manager at that time.
Mr. Puckey was a grand old man—very quaint, but clever. Many people had such faith in him that instead of going to the doctor they would go to Mr. Puckey for advice and help. He had two daughters. One was a chemist and worked in the shop with him; the other became Dr. Puckey and held a very important position at the Rachael Forster Hospital.

The office then consisted of the general office, the boardroom and the balcony. The balcony was later demolished, along with all the balconies on Crown Street. When Mr. Tubman came to the office he felt he could manage on his own, so he stood me down for a few months and I worked in the Mount Kembla Post Office with Mr. and Mrs. Rutty. I really enjoyed that change too. When the Pass Books came in for audit again, Mr. Tubman asked me to come and help him out and decided to take me back again.

Mr. Harold Cox was the solicitor for the Society at that time. His conveyancer was Mr. Hooper, who had the most beautiful handwriting I have ever seen and did the whole of the deeds by hand. Mr. Tubman was the Secretary of the Grand United Ancient Order of Druids Lodge and also of the Wollongong Friendly Societies Hall Co-operative and I assisted him with the books for these. It was good experience and I met a lot of people this way.

When Mr. Tubman came he changed the end of the financial year from the end of March to the end of June so that once we had a fifteen-month year.

The building being very small, we only had a cleaner once a week, so that was another duty for me, to keep the office tidy the rest of the week.

The auditors when I commenced work were Messrs. Krippner and Herd, Mr. Tubman changed to George Christie and R. W. Burke as auditors.

At one stage during Mr. Tubman’s time he rented the balcony to a dressmaker where she had a number of pupils come in for lessons. One of the girls that came was Josie Vereker, now Mrs. Jones.

On one occasion I remember a dog ran up the stairs with its tongue almost severed; it had been hit by a car. It was lying on the outside of the counter. I was alone and I felt I was trapped wondering how I would manage to get it out if no one came; but Mr. Arthur Reid came up and I was relieved. He kindly went to the police station and got a policeman who took the dog away to have it destroyed.

In 1930 the office was moved to a new building at 112 Crown Street, where the present Head Office now stands. This was rather a small building compared to the existing building. It consisted of a small front lobby with a counter and on the right of the counter was one door that led into a passage which by-passed the office, the large boardroom and a small back room at the end of the passage where some of the records were stored. Outside the door was the room with the toilets. At the top of three steps was a large old wooden building in the backyard, which adjoined Parsons’ timber yard. Further records were housed there and many a time I had to go up there to search amongst the old papers and books to supply information for solicitors. In the front lobby through the window behind the
front doors was a roll top desk Mr. Tubman bought. When the Royal Insurance Company Inspectors came down, which was once a month, they worked at this desk. I saw a few of these Inspectors come and go; as one moved up from the position of Inspector another took his place. For some time I had no assistant except occasionally a casual helper. Later I had one permanent, and then two. I only had two helpers until my brother came and the staff began to grow to what it is today.

Our morning tea room was the strongroom which had a power point where we boiled the jug and hid around the corner to have our morning tea. The Secretary had his at the table in the boardroom where he worked.

Messrs. Russell & McLelland were the Solicitors when the new building was erected and occupied the upstairs offices. Mrs. Gertrude Bell was their Secretary. There was a shop built on the lower side of the office. It was first occupied as a cake shop by Mrs. A. M. Potts and her daughter Miss Alice Potts who is now Mrs. Insley. Later it was occupied by Doyle & Collard, Hairdressers, and then the Misses Harmon had a stationery shop. They later sold out to Coddingtons.

During the war there was a brick room built at the back door for an air raid shelter. We only used it once when there was an alert. Later it was used to store records.

During the depression the borrowing members were allowed a suspension of repayments to help them over a bad period. The Society was also very wise in the way it looked after its investors. It did not allow any one member to take out large sums of money. Withdrawals were limited for a time and this kept people happy. During these years also Mr. Tubman started agencies with T. Jarman's Estate Agency at Woonona, Mrs. Callcott's Agency at Thirroul and Mrs. Marshalls at Wentworth Street, Port Kembla, for collection of repayments.

I was appointed acting Secretary by the Board three times, in the interim periods after the deaths of Mr. Stumbles, Mr. Tubman and Mr. Whitfield until the new secretary was appointed.