

Nothing ventured, nothing gained

Alice Anderson—mechanic, chauffeur and entrepreneur

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Archives can often provide great insight into the lives of individuals. However, more often than not, this view is incomplete. Not everything that is created is kept and documents are often lost or destroyed over time. Such is the case with Alice Anderson, mechanic, chauffeur and Kew Garage proprietor. There is no 'Alice Anderson Collection'; rather, the physical evidence of her life exists in dispersed fragments. I encountered a comparatively large number of these while working on the collection of Alice's sister, Frances Derham, which is interesting in its own right, documenting as it does her early art practice and later career in early childhood education. The story of Alice Anderson is fascinating because it is incomplete, especially in contrast to that of her sister. The tragic circumstances of Anderson's death have raised her to almost mythic status, and have caused much speculation. Although mystery continues to linger over the life of Alice Anderson, it becomes clear that she lived up to her personal motto: *qui ne risque rien n'a rien* (nothing ventured, nothing gained).

Alecia (Alice) Elizabeth Foley Anderson was born in Melbourne to engineer J.T. Noble Anderson and his wife Ellen Mary Anderson (née White-Spunner) on 8 June 1897.



Opposite: Alice Anderson wearing chauffeur uniform, c. 1918. BWP/2757, ref. no. 1988.0061, Frances Derham Collection, University of Melbourne Archives.

Right: Alice Anderson in her Hupmobile Touring, c. 1918. BWP/2761, ref. no. 1988.0061, Frances Derham Collection, University of Melbourne Archives.



In 1901 the Anderson family relocated to Dunedin, New Zealand, due to the lack of engineering jobs following the depression of the 1890s. Upon returning to Victoria in 1906, Alice's father worked as shire engineer in several regions, including Alexandra (1910–12) and Healesville (1911–18).¹ During this time the Anderson family lived in Narbethong, at their property 'Springbank'.²

Alice attended Merton Hall (Melbourne Girls Grammar) from second term of 1913 until December 1914,³ but her schooling was interrupted by a family financial crisis that year. In 1915 Alice took formal lessons in bookkeeping, history and French, as well as private lessons with Jessie Webb, lecturer in history at the University of Melbourne.⁴ In September that year Alice moved into 67 Cotham Road, Kew, with her sister Frances.⁵ During this time Alice taught her younger sisters Joan and Claire.⁶ Claire followed in her father's footsteps, becoming the first woman engineering student at the University of Melbourne.⁷

Alice's career as a driver and mechanic began as a result of a fortunate confluence of events. The first of these occurred in 1916, with her father's incorporation of the Blacks' Spur Motor Service Co. Ltd in the hills to the east of Melbourne.

Established as a mutual company, the business offered a driving service between Alexandra railway station and Healesville, providing an easy alternative to train travel.⁸ It operated the local mail route, and was intended to develop tourism in the region.⁹ The first meeting of shareholders took place on 17 April 1916, and soon after this the company purchased two Buick charabancs (open-topped motor coaches).¹⁰ By October 1916 the company also offered car hire.¹¹ It was at this time that Alice learnt to drive 'on the Blacks' Spur Road', a dangerous section of road that was thought to be 'no place for a woman to be driving'.¹²

In September 1916 an advertisement for a 'qualified driver' at the Blacks' Spur Motor Service was placed 'by order of Acting Secretary Alice E.F. Anderson'.¹³ Although aged only 19 at the time, and working as the company's bookkeeper, Alice stepped into the position, which involved driving the dangerous mail route 'from Healesville over Blacks' Spur to Marysville'.¹⁴ It was around this time that her father decided to add an American Hupmobile Touring to the fleet. Touring cars were a style of automobile popular in the early 20th century, with five or more seats and a convertible roof. The story goes that since the other directors did not

support the purchase, he decided to give the deposit on the car to his daughter Alice.¹⁵

With an eight-seat Hupmobile now in her possession, Alice was quick to set up her own enterprise. By September 1917 she was operating a chauffeur service from 67 Cotham Road, Kew, offering private weekend trips from Melbourne to Healesville.¹⁶ This business was hardly conventional, as it was run out of a 'hired ... garage attached to a private house'.¹⁷ But the business seemed to be prospering, as in less than a year Alice added another car to her fleet.¹⁸

Alice bought land at 88 Cotham Road with the aim of building her own garage, although she continued to operate out of temporary sheds for two years.¹⁹ One source explains that 'before she was twenty she came to Melbourne and went into a garage to complete her training. She emerged a fully qualified mechanic'.²⁰ Another source claims that Alice walked into Dennys, Lascelles garage and asked for a job, only to be laughed at by the manager. It goes on to say that Alice persisted, 'and thus Miss Anderson graduated into the get-out-and-get-under profession'.²¹

The year 1918 also saw the formation of the Women's Automobile Club. Alice was a



founding member, holding the position of vice-president.²² By December of that year the club had its own car badge, featuring the head of the Roman goddess Minerva.²³ Also in 1918 Alice exhibited her new invention, the 'Anderson get out and under board', at the Royal Agricultural Show. The invention

was a 'board on castor-wheels, for use when working under a car'.²⁴ Unfortunately, Alice neglected to file a United States patent,²⁵ and in January 1920 an identical invention was patented under the name of the 'automobile creeper'.²⁶

By January 1919 work on the garage was well underway and on 21 January Alice made an important announcement: 'we have moved out of the Old into the New'.²⁷ However, after a few days, Alice complained that 'the Garage is not finished yet of course'.²⁸ Kew Garage was finally completed in December 1919.²⁹

The services provided by the Kew Garage were diverse and included taxi services in the city, catered country drives for up to three days, driving lessons, car garaging and maintenance.³⁰ Such a range of services was not unusual for the garages of the time, but Alice's all-female staff and client base, which was 'largely among women', set her business apart. Kew Garage provided driving lessons to women at a time when few had the chance to learn to drive, and a chauffeur service, which allowed young women to attend dances without their parents.³¹

Kew Garage developed a reputation for efficiency, based on services such as its famous eight-hour 'once over' mechanical

overhaul.³² It was also known for its chauffeur uniforms, reputedly designed by Alice. When working in the garage Alice wore mechanic's overalls and boots, and her hair was cut in a cropped style. Although a radical hairstyle for the time, it was extremely practical for someone working with dangerous machinery. A contemporary account also tells us that Alice's 'motoring uniform of riding breeches and coat' led to her often being mistaken for a boy.³³

Alice lived at a frantic pace and worked long hours, often returning home late at night.³⁴ Her letters are fascinating evidence of her unique personality and busy schedule. They are brief, informal and full of abbreviations. In letters to her mother she often protests that she is 'too busy to write' and that there is 'no news'. Another letter concludes, 'that's all the runs and biz today and please say thankyou for getting any epistle at all. Yrs A'.³⁵

By 1925 Kew Garage had expanded greatly, employing nine women. Alice took on female drivers and apprentices, providing new and well-paying career opportunities. The apprenticeship program became so popular that 50 women applied during the early months of 1925.³⁶ By 1926, the garage and its 'gallant little band' had a fleet of five cars.³⁷



On 13 August 1926 Alice and her friend (and former teacher) Jessie Webb set off on a motor trip bound for Alice Springs.³⁸ Alice drove a two-seat Austin 7, popularly known as a 'Baby Austin'. The travellers were well prepared, carrying with them 'two guns, sleeping bags, compass, four gallons of water, and a supply of biscuits'.³⁹ From Adelaide they took a camel track to Alice Springs, with stops along the way.⁴⁰ This rough form of travelling proved too much for Webb and she returned to Melbourne.⁴¹ On the way back from Alice Springs Alice sold the Austin 7 in Oodnadatta.⁴² Her sister Frances later explained that 'there was ... the feeling that the return journey is—never quite as interesting as the one going'.⁴³ Alice wired Kew Garage to send Kathleen Hall, a school friend, to accompany her on the return journey.⁴⁴ The pair took a train to Parachilna and spent several days exploring the surrounding areas on foot, visiting Mullaloo and Alpana stations.⁴⁵ They arrived in Melbourne by train on 11 September.⁴⁶

September 17 was a busy day at Kew Garage. At around 6 pm Alice went into the workshop to clean two guns that she had borrowed for her trip, along with her own gun, a Colt automatic pistol. 'Six or seven minutes later' a sound like 'a stone on

Alice Anderson and Jessie Webb in Anderson's Austin 7, bound for Alice Springs, 1926. BWP/2758, ref. no. 1988.0061, Frances Derham Collection, University of Melbourne Archives.

the roof' was heard by Marie Edith Eddie, one of Alice's drivers. Marie found Alice 'lying on her stomach with her face turned to the right'. Alice was rushed to Lancewood Private Hospital, but she was already dead, killed by a gunshot through her forehead. A coroner's investigation concluded that her death was caused by the gun accidentally firing during cleaning. Employees of the garage dismissed the possibility of suicide, stating that Alice had not been acting any differently from usual before her death, except that she had mentioned that the garage was not doing well.⁴⁷ In her will Alice left money to her lifelong friend and sole executor, Jessie MacBeth of Lancewood Private Hospital.⁴⁸

Kew Garage continued to operate under the management of Alice's friend Ethel Bage⁴⁹ until at least 1935.⁵⁰ In 1937 May Rooney took over the business, retaining the all-female staff and declaring that 'the Alice Anderson tradition is here to stay'.⁵¹ Despite Rooney's bravado, the business soon changed. By 1938, driving instruction became its primary focus,⁵² with the Alice Anderson Motor School operating at 88 Cotham Road until at least 1954.⁵³



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The collections of **University of Melbourne Archives** are available for use by all genuine researchers; please visit the UMA website www.lib.unimelb.edu.au/collections/archives/ for further information.

- 1 Brian E. Lloyd, 'Joshua Thomas Noble Anderson (1865–1949), engineer: A biographical sketch', in Martin L. Ray (ed.), *9th National Conference on Engineering Heritage: Proceedings*, Melbourne: Institution of Engineers, Australia, Victoria Division, 1998, p. 33.
- 2 This article draws on the collections at the University of Melbourne Archives (ref. no. 1988.0061) of the eminent art educator Frances Derham MBE (née Anderson, 1894–1987), eldest sister of Alice Anderson. Frances Derham's second son, Sir David Plumley Derham KBE CMG (1920–1985), served as vice-chancellor of the University of Melbourne from 1968 to 1982.
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- 4 Ref. no. 1988.0061.1041, Frances Derham Collection, University of Melbourne Archives (UMA).
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- 19 'The woman who does', p. 74.
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- 24 'Motor notes', *Punch*, 10 October 1918, p. 571.
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- 27 Ref. no. 1988.0061.0098, UMA.
- 28 Ref. no. 1988.0061.1043, UMA.
- 29 'The woman who does'.
- 30 Ref. no. 1988.0061.0751, UMA.
- 31 'Melbourne's woman chauffeur'.
- 32 'Miss Anderson's death'.
- 33 'Motor notes', 10 October 1918.
- 34 *Church of England Girls' Grammar School Notes*, no. 68, December 1926, p. 43.
- 35 Ref. no. 1988.0061.009, UMA.
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- 38 'Women overlanders', *The Mail*, 21 August 1926, p. 30.
- 39 'Intrepid women motoring to Alice Springs', *The News* (Adelaide), 6 August 1926, p. 6.
- 40 'Intrepid women motoring to Alice Springs'.
- 41 *The News* (Adelaide), 22 September 1926, p. 4.
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