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# THE PEOPLE

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## WHO MADE

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# AUSTRALIA

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# GREAT

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# DORIS TAYLOR



## ORIGINATOR OF MEALS ON WHEELS IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA

1909-1968

**P**analysed at the age of seven by a spinal injury, Doris Taylor spent years encased in plaster, unable to move her head or her hands. Through medical skill and her own fighting spirit, she made it into a wheelchair and became the champion and the crusader of the underdog, the needy and the underprivileged. Her constant refrain was: 'We are in the world to help each other'.

At the age of 16, Doris returned home from hospital and found Australia in the grip of the Depression. Her first steps were to organise a soup kitchen for needy children and to become secretary of a mothers' club — 'Fancy me, an old maid, running a mothers' club!' Doris Taylor could laugh easily at herself. Her strong personal authority and perfectionism were combined with a delightful sense of humour.

Doris Taylor was a born organiser. She also had a magnetic personality, the ability to gather around her dedicated women from all walks of life, fine leadership and executive ability and a powerful will which nothing could deflect or defeat.

Her motive in forming Meals on Wheels in South Australia was concern at the plight of

the elderly and infirm who were forced to enter homes and institutions against their will. She studied the available material on the services then operating in England and South Melbourne and evolved a detailed plan.

On October 6, 1953, 96 pensioners met at the Rechabite Hall, Norwood and donated £10 to inaugurate the movement. A committee was elected and a constitution drafted. The first Meals on Wheels kitchen opened the following year and Doris Taylor lived to see a total of 17 kitchens in the metropolitan area and 4 in the country in operation.

Amongst other community activities, Doris Taylor was a foundation member of the Social Welfare Advisory Council set up under the new Social Welfare Act in South Australia. She was made MBE in 1959.

She was an inexhaustible worker — guiding, directing, telephoning, writing, speaking at meetings and clubs, and, until the final years of her life, travelling long distances in all weathers in an unprotected motor-powered wheelchair, steered by her shoulders. Arthur Daly paid tribute to 'the woman who was possessed of an ever-mastering desire to excel and a will of iron that gave her frail body the power to carry through what she conceived to be her duty.'



# UNSUNG HEROES & HEROINES

*of Australia*

EDITED BY SUZY BALDWIN



# Doris Taylor

1909–1968

Meals on Wheels founder

Written by: Rosemary Neill

Nominated by: Mick Young

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**A**t sixteen, Doris Taylor was declared incurable. She could not turn her head, feed or clothe herself or manipulate her tooth brush.

Doctors, believing that she would be forever a prisoner in her bed, recommended that she be sent to a home for incurables. But Doris's mother, a widow bringing up three children in Adelaide during the Great Depression, was adamant that home was the place for Doris, who had spent most of her childhood in a wheelchair following an accident that permanently damaged her spine when she was seven.

Doris, whose determination would take her where her body could not, later wrote: 'I had been in hospital almost continuously from the time of my accident and so, when I went home, I was shocked to find how bad things had become and how everyone was affected by the Depression. 'I thought...I must do something so I became secretary to the mothers' club of a kindergarten in which fathers of forty-six of the fifty-four children attending were unemployed [and] organised schemes to raise money.'

Doris, who had been a brilliant scholar and an accomplished pianist, proved a deft organiser and fund raiser. Still, she felt that she was

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not achieving enough. 'I decided that political action was what was needed,' she said. 'My reasoning was that good legislation could ensure security and protection for everybody.' Doris went on to become a successful Labor Party activist, an election campaign director for Don Dunstan, an office holder in the ALP's Norwood (South Australia) branch and a friend of Ben Chifley and Arthur Caldwell, but her ideological base remained humanitarian rather than partisan.

Politics brought Doris into wide contact with the community where she 'learned that old people were the ones most needing organised help'. From her own experience she knew the importance of independence and understood the need of the elderly to be looked after in their own homes. As she explained, 'To many of them, to go to an institution of any kind, to be torn away from their home, however small and poor it may be, to have to adjust to new surroundings and a totally new routine of living, is unbearable even to contemplate.' So in the early 1950s, armed with a \$10 donation, an abhorrence of institutions, and research on English and Melbourne Meals on Wheels services, Doris began to evolve a service for Adelaide.

For months she bullied and cajoled both government and private companies to find a place from which the service could operate. News Limited, then a small Adelaide company, publicised her efforts but support was poor. Some people were hostile to Doris's plan, believing it would never work.

She was not dissuaded. She held the first meeting for South Australia's Meals On Wheels in her bedroom and on 9 August 1954, the service started up with eight patients and eleven helpers, who worked from a hut without sinks or drainage systems.

Today, South Australia's Meals on Wheels serves between 3800 and 3900 meals each day through its ninety-seven branches. It has 8600 helpers and includes home help, laundry, library, chiropody, frozen meal and hospital-based meal services.

Doris was awarded an MBE in 1959 and died in May 1968. Arthur Daly, who worked for her at Meals On Wheels, wrote in a tribute that she was one of the great Australians of this century. He added: 'The world is a better place because she lived in it. In the poet's words: "She has left footprints on the sands of time".'



*Doris Taylor, MBE, whose own disability made her acutely aware of the need of the infirm for independence*