

Living la vida doco

The Age July 13, 2008

A new film reveals how Vida Goldstein's convictions changed the place of women forever, writes Deborah Gough.

THE turn of last century, as European dignitaries swooned at the voice of Melbourne's Nellie Melba, across the Atlantic another Victorian woman had the ear of the most powerful man in the Americas.

It was 1902 and Vida Goldstein, the first Australian political leader to meet with US president Theodore Roosevelt following Federation, was also a household name.

Although now little known outside feminist and historic circles, Goldstein's reputation as a campaigner for women's right to vote was so great that she was granted a meeting with Roosevelt while visiting the US for the International Woman Suffrage Conference as the Australian and New Zealand delegate.

Now, 100 years since she helped to win Victorian women the right to vote, the life of Vida Goldstein, who was born in Portland in 1869 and raised in Melbourne, is the subject of a docu-drama by Melbourne filmmaker Karen Buczynski Lee.

Goldstein's written account of her successful meeting with Roosevelt will be included in the production *When Vida met the President*, which Buczynski Lee is in negotiations with the ABC to fund.

Goldstein was arguably Australia's mother of feminism: an internationally renowned suffragist, the first woman in the British Empire to stand for parliament, and an unofficial ministerial adviser who worked tirelessly for the rights of women and children.

She also was an avid campaigner for equal pay for women and for the regulation of working hours for child labour.

Buczynski Lee said she became fascinated with Goldstein's life after reading a line in a book by feminist lawyer and author Jocelyne Scutt that described women before they were granted the right to vote as "non persons".

She said one of Goldstein's greatest talents was her ability to communicate — a gift that helped the suffrage campaign reach beyond just the sympathisers who gathered at meetings.

"At the time people would go to hear people speak for entertainment and Vida understood that and used it, she would often use a splash of a pink feather in her hat, or a red feather and it was often commented on in newspaper reports," Buczynski Lee said.

The vote campaign of Goldstein and the other suffragists ended in November 1908 when Victorian women won the right to vote — 14 years after South Australian women became the first in the country to win suffrage.

Research for the docu-drama has led to the discovery and re-release this year of a Vida Goldstein book by the Victorian Women's Trust. Goldstein wrote the book, which was thought to have been lost in the Melbourne University Baillieu Library, after contacting lawmakers in other Australian states to ask them what the outcome had been of women getting the vote. The book was sent to women's groups around the world and used to lobby Victorian politicians.

Although Goldstein was a pacifist, she supported the suffragettes in Britain even though they resorted to throwing stones during their protests and were arrested.

Buczynski Lee said the docu-drama would look at Goldstein's public life against the backdrop of her personal life, focusing on her complex relationship with her father, Jacob. "It is essentially a father-daughter relationship story," she said.

Jacob Goldstein was supportive of his daughter's Presbyterian Ladies' College education but clashed with her about women's voting rights. Still, they would sit side-by-side in Parliament listening to political arguments on the issue.

Although she was never elected, Buczynski Lee says Goldstein's role became that of a ministerial adviser on legislation affecting women and children.

The inner south-eastern Melbourne electorate of Goldstein was named in honour of the woman who, when she died of cancer in 1949 at the age of 80, was still said to be "mentally vigorous".

Victorian Women's Trust executive director Mary Crooks has called for a statue to celebrate Vida Goldstein, saying that had she been an American feminist, she would be revered as one of the "mothers of the feminist movement". Crooks said the trust would celebrate the 100th anniversary of women's suffrage in November with a new "women's anthem" by singer and composer Kavisha Mazzella and a series of forums at BMW Edge at Federation Square.

"The trust was very heavily involved with the commemoration of Federation, but I believe that this anniversary means much more to women," she said.

The trust also is discussing with RMIT the possibility of flying the feminist flag over Storey Hall in recognition of Goldstein's work running a charity centre from the premises during a long wharf dispute in 1917.

In support of the dock workers, Goldstein and other women made 30,000 meals, gave away 30,000 items of clothing, repaired 2000 boots and gave 6500 men's haircuts.

This story was found at:

<http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2008/07/12/1215658200021.html>