

THE ORIGINS OF THE ALLIANCE FRANÇAISE DE HOBART

Being the Public Officer of our Association and a history buff, I was delegated by our committee to carry out the research work required to help determine accurately the foundation date of our AF by delving into our past history. Although we all knew that we “went back” to the 50’s and even beyond to link up with a French club, no one had any hard evidence let alone some data on hand regarding our origin or actual early history. My challenge was to unearth the unknown, sort fact from fiction which entailed the scrutiny of all pertaining data and records available at the Consumers Affairs Office and The Archives Office of Tasmania both located at Murray Street, Hobart.

Our AF of Hobart is the direct progeny of the “French Circle” an informal francophile social group with about a dozen devotees, a group which was first established in Hobart sometime in 1926. The exact establishment date is unknown as no minutes were kept of the circle in its informal infancy. Their initial meetings consisted of camaraderie, exchange of French books and listening to French gramophone records. The French Circle’s gradual flourish and development gave way to their formalising of its status to that of an Association, by adoption of a 15 Article Constitution on 23 August 1933.

No record of the French Circle exists with any State regulatory authority as in 1933, they were not required by law to register their Association. The French Circle’s earliest record of committee meeting is dated 5 July, 1929, held then at Miss Stops residence in Patrick Street, Hobart. That meeting is in fact the very first recorded entry in their oldest committee Minutes Book dated 1929-1930.

The Alliance Française in Hobart has been operating at least since 1 July, 1940. The earliest record available at the State Archives was their Balance Sheet 1 July 1940 to 30 June 1941 and, at first glance, no proof positive linkage between the French Circle and the AF de Hobart appeared. Furthermore, it wasn’t until 1933 that our AF’s earliest official Constitution was written, adopted and deposited with the appropriate State regulatory authority (by then a legal requirement). It was logical, then, to ascertain that the linkage must have occurred in the period between 1933 and 1940, but unfortunately the Minutes Book covering those 7 years were not at the State Archives. To our great joy and relief, the 2 missing Minutes Books turned up after a general appeal to our membership and friends. A past AF President handed them in at our Quiz Night in May 2003, earning our gratitude for the good care and custodianship thus demonstrated.

The necessary proof, the absolute evidence of linkage can be found in the single Minutes Book covering period 1/7/1936 to 2/3/1954. This crucially important book contains the continuously successive records of both the French Circle and that of AF including all transition details.

We had the much needed hard evidence, the breakthrough which clearly revealed an uninterrupted and direct continuity between the French Circle and the AF of today, details which enabled us to determine our foundation date.

In their committee meeting of 23 September 1937, the French Circle first decided to “consider the advisability of forming the French Circle into a new branch of the Alliance Française”, here in Hobart. At that point in time, they wanted to replace or refloat an Alliance Française (Mk 1) that had become defunct and had disappeared after only 18 short months of operation in Hobart.

To that end, Miss J. Batt, the Hon. Secretary of the French Circle was authorised to pursue this matter and seek detailed information from the AF Headquarters in Paris, whilst a special meeting was called for 7 October 1937 to discuss the merits of affiliation with the AF network. At that meeting all information received from Paris was tabled and it was emphasised that “the French Circle was given a carte blanche” for becoming a member branch of the AF with no conditions imposed other than giving the AF Headquarters a (yearly) account of activities and transactions. No great expense was to be incurred for joining, and par contre, the status and prestige would be raised to that of an official body from a mere friendship club.

The added bonuses were, it was reported, “the advantage of being able to get in touch with the French visitors through the kindness of Mr. Ellison, the then Consular Agent for France in Hobart”, and also the possibility of direct contact with the branches of the Alliances in Sydney and Melbourne.

As the majority of members were present , the then President of the French Circle, Dr. Goddard proposed “without further ado” that a motion be put “to form the French Circle into a branch of the Alliance Française”. A member Mr. Macfarlane proposed the resolution which was seconded by another member Mrs. Dwyer , and the motion was carried unanimously. There was general agreement also that a subcommittee be formed to draft a new AF Constitution for the future. So, from that night of 7 October onwards, the French Circle and the Alliance Française in Hobart became the one and the same Association, until formal recognition was granted about 5 months later. At the committee meeting of 10 March 1938, Dr. Goddard the President, was able to break the big news that the French Consul General had formally advised him of the official sanction by France regarding recognition of the change of name to that of Alliance Française.

It would have been a presumptuous faux pas had the French Circle changed its name any earlier than the arrival of the official sanction. They did not “jump the gun”, but certainly operated with aplomb. Furthermore since the official recognition of the new name occurred on the 9th month of the financial year, the AGM of July 1938 (for the year ending 30 June 1938) had to be on record, but under the French Circle name for the very last time. The metamorphic change of appellation then took place. The French Circle (or the Cercle Français) thus ceased to exist as from 1 July 1938, giving rise to the name of Alliance Française de Hobart (to become AF de Hobart Inc., much later).

In the following two years, July 1938 to July 1940, the Alliance Française in Hobart appeared less active if not dormant whilst their proposed new Constitution never left the drawing board. In view of these fully verifiable details now revealed, the actual foundation date of our Alliance Française could be validly claimed as being 23 August 1933, the date of the adoption of the original 15 Article Constitution of the French Circle. If a child has its name changed at any time during its early years - for any reason whatsoever, one thing remains certain: the one thing can never be changed. The date of its birth.

This research based discovery will culminate in the celebration of the 70th anniversary of our foundation this year, albeit a bit late by a few months. Alliance Française members of today owe a debt of gratitude to those members (particularly the office bearers) who, since 1933, with their devotion and hard work, have ensured the successful continuity of the Alliance Française de Hobart Inc.

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