



ONCE A QUEEN

A CELEBRATION OF JACARANDA

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PREVIOUS PAGE: 1930'S JACARANDA GIRLS ABOVE: BARBARA MCLENNAN – 1959 JACARANDA QUEEN.
INSET: LEXIE LANGLEY – 1957 JACARANDA QUEEN

» Once A Queen

Once a Queen is a most engaging documentary. On the surface it is simply an examination of an annual festival held in a northern NSW country town, but *Once a Queen* is actually a great deal more than this. Using the annual Grafton Jacaranda Festival and the crowning of its Jacaranda Queen as a focus, this film explores many themes including belonging, winning, fantasy, celebration and what it means to be part of a rural community in modern Australia.

The Jacaranda Festival, held to celebrate the beauty of the Jacaranda trees that have flowered in late spring in Grafton for over 100 years, was first held in 1935, as the rural town was still struggling out of the Great Depression. It has the distinction of being the longest running floral festival and one of the longest running community festivals anywhere in Australia.

Filmmaker Lawrence Johnstone, who wrote, produced and directed *Once a Queen*, was moved to make this documentary by the enthusiasm with which the people of Grafton embrace their

festival. 'The people of this town are showing the most amazing community spirit and put in an incredible amount of hard work throughout the year to bring this week alive and help this town celebrate its identity', Johnstone said.

The specific impetus for the documentary came from the decision of the Jacaranda Festival Committee to invite former Queens and Princesses to return to Grafton in 2004, to take part in the parade marking the festival's seventieth birthday. The enthusiasm with which former festival 'royalty' accepted this invitation (forty-

four former Queens, fifty-three former princesses, and thirty-seven former matrons of honour agreed to be part of the celebration) is testament to the importance that the people of Grafton place on their festival, its heritage and its continued place in the life of their town.

Once a Queen would be a valuable educational resource for students of English, Australian History, Women's Studies, Social Studies, Psychology or Media Studies. It is suitable for a wide range of age groups and could be interpreted on a variety of levels.



ABOVE: 1957 JACARANDA CROWNING NIGHT

» Background on the Festival

Grafton on the beautiful Clarence River, traditionally home to the Gumbaynggirr people, was first 'settled' by Europeans, in pursuit of the rich red-gold cedar which grew there in abundance, in 1831. By 1851 it was already a developing community, officially named Grafton after the Duke of Grafton, who was the Grandfather of the NSW Governor, Charles Fitzroy.

Although the beautiful cedars quickly fell victim to the greed of entrepreneurs, a love of trees seems to have been central to the life of Grafton from the start, and the cedars were replaced by literally thousands of other trees, among them the first jacarandas, planted in the 1880s. In 1907, the town's identification with this beautiful mauve flowering tree was cemented, when local nurseryman Henry Volckers planted eighty jacarandas along Pound Street (later renamed Jacaranda Avenue).

By 1935 Volckers' trees had grown to maturity and the decision was taken to hold a week of festivities to celebrate

their beauty. The idea for the festival came from Grafton resident, Mr E.H. Chataway. As many as 4,000 people from the district are believed to have gathered in Jacaranda Avenue for that first festival, witnessing a street parade and the crowning of Minnie Jones as the first Princess Jacaranda.

Over the past seventy years there have been changes – some subtle, some more significant. The numbers have grown, much of the activity now takes place at the showgrounds, the festival is now headed by a Queen with her attendant princesses and there is a fundraising element to the activities. Moreover, the festival now

includes artistic and cultural activities including the nationally recognised Jacaranda Acquisitive Drawing Award, presented by Grafton's Regional Art Gallery situated in the historic Prentice House.

Despite these changes, in essence it is still the same Jacaranda festival that was described by founder E.H. Chataway in this way:

So was born a tradition of yearly festivity, when the trees shall bloom again - when song, dance and gaiety shall reveal the Australian capacity of real comradeship in 'Jacaranda Time in Grafton'.



ABOVE: JACARANDA TREES AT NIGHT

»» Before Viewing the Documentary

1. Think about a local festival that you have attended (it may be in a country town, suburb or shopping centre, a school, sporting club or park).
 - What was the reason for the festival?
 - Was there a particular theme?
 - What activities took place?
 - Were there people chosen to take special roles?
 - Were there awards given?
 - Did local commercial enterprises get involved?
 - What impact did the festival have on those who attended and on the organization/ locality/ institution that it was celebrating?
2. The Jacaranda Festival, like many others, has the crowning of a Queen as one of its central activities. Do you think that in the early twenty-first century such practices are still relevant?
3. Use the internet to find information about one other floral festival held in a country town or region in Australia. Research the background, themes and activities of that festival. As you watch *Once a Queen* make comparisons between the two festivals.
4. One of the powerful images conveyed through this documentary is of a close knit supportive rural community. Do you believe that rural communities are more supportive and caring than suburban communities or does it depend on the particular community and the people involved?
5. If you were approached to be part of a contest to be crowned a King, Queen, Prince or Princess, and you were told that by doing so you would be helping a very worthwhile charity, would you agree to enter? Explain your thinking and justify your decision.



ABOVE: JACARANDA THURSDAY 1950'S.. INSET: MINNIE JONES – 1936 JACARANDA PRINCESS

» As You Watch the Documentary

(Questions for reflection and discussion)

1. How important are the jacaranda trees to this festival and to the effectiveness of this documentary?
2. The documentary begins with extracts from a Movietone newsreel taken some time in the 1950s. In what ways has the reporting of events such as this festival changed over the past fifty years?
3. A recurring theme is the dream of 'every little girl' to become a princess. Despite modern feminism and republican movements, do you think that this is still the case? Think about the extraordinary popularity of Princess Diana and the huge interest in Princess Mary of Denmark. How do you explain this 'princess phenomenon'?
4. Almost every aspect of this film is positive. Virtually everyone interviewed and every comment made reflect a view that the festival and the crowning are good for the town and for the people involved. There are only two brief comments or moments that are less than positive. Identify these and comment on what they say about the festival.
5. As you watch the past Jacaranda Queens speaking of their experiences and their observations about the festival, try to identify similarities among them. Is there one former Queen who seems different from the rest? Who is she and why?
6. Do you think that a festival such as this could be as effective and long lasting if it was held in the suburb of a large capital city instead of a regional town? Explain your view.



ABOVE: 1950'S JACARANDA HATS AND GLOVES. BELOW: 1930'S JACARANDA DUTCH FLOAT

» English Questions and Activities

- When Emma was chosen as the Holiday Princess for 2004, she was clearly 'stoked' but Katina reacted to being announced as Jacaranda Princess with thinly veiled disappointment. Try to imagine what each girl was really thinking and construct a dialogue between the two Princesses at the end of the evening.
- Many of the former Queens comment on their sadness at relinquishing the crown at the end of their reign. Imagine that you are a Queen at the end of your term of office. Write the speech that you will deliver at the Ball held to announce your successor.
- Imagine that the town of Grafton has decided that it will not hold the Jacaranda festival in the coming year. Reasons given are the increasing cost of the festival and the fact that it is seen as 'out-of-date'. Write a proposal to the council challenging this decision and putting forward a strong case for the continuation of the festival.
- When the former Jacaranda Queens are asked to comment on their actual crowning, they use terms such as 'surreal', 'slow motion', 'floated around', 'all a bit of a blur'. Use these and similar terms to convey the feeling of being chosen as Jacaranda Queen in a poem or reflection.
- You are a young man who believes that the crowning of a queen and princesses is sexist and discriminatory. You see no reason why the men of the town should not have the opportunity to raise money for charity and at the same time, receive recognition for their good looks, public speaking ability and community spirit. Moreover, you would like the opportunity to compete for the valuable prizes offered to the women. Write a submission to the Jacaranda festival Committee explaining why you think that the festival should also crown a King and several Princes.





LEFT-RIGHT: 1950'S JACARANDA SHOP DISPLAYS; JACARANDA ROYAL PAGEANT

» Social Education Questions and Activities

1. Locate Grafton on a map of Australia. Identify the latitude and longitude, the climatic variations, topography and main products and economic activities of the area. Use this material plus what you have learnt about the town and the festival, to prepare a tourist brochure on Grafton.
2. When Samantha (an aspiring singer) is crowned as Jacaranda Queen for 2004, she says: 'It doesn't get any better than this.' Do you believe that she will still feel this way in five years?
3. The notion of crowning an attractive girl as a Queen or Princess seems an anachronism in this post feminist world. Do you see any evidence, in the latter part of the documentary, that the modern young women taking part in the contest are aware of this? Refer to the words or observations of several of the candidates.
4. Use the internet to research one other pageant that culminates in the crowning of a young woman as a Queen or Princess or which awards the title Miss ... Write a report on the pageant, covering the following:
 - The purpose of the pageant.
 - The history of the pageant and the way that it may have changed over time.
 - The criteria for nomination and for success in this competition.
 - Any criticism that the pageant may have received and the response that has been given.
5. Construct and conduct a survey among your classmates and among a group of people in the fifty-plus age group. Compare the responses of both groups to a series of questions about the place of beauty pageants in today's world.
6. All of the Jacaranda Queens, past and present, make reference to tradition when they talk about the place of the festival in the life of Grafton. Do you believe that this is something real and tangible or merely something that the women feel they should say?
7. Which one of the former Jacaranda Queens seems to you to be the most 'real'? What is it about her that makes her a bit different from the others?
8. Many of the former queens make comments about the value of growing up in a country town such as Grafton. One says: 'I don't know of any child now, with all the things that they have and get, that had the childhood we had.' To what extent do you believe a country childhood is better or worse than a city childhood? List five positives about a country childhood and five positives about a city childhood.
9. Many of those interviewed for this documentary extol the virtues of life in a country town. They speak of the sense of tradition, familiarity and mutual support. One former Queen says of her experiences in Sydney: 'After a while, it [the city] turns you into quite a hard person.' To what extent do you believe that this is true? Write a dialogue between two people working in similar jobs, one in a country town and one in a large city. Each person is arguing in support of their particular place of work.



ABOVE: PAT WAGHORN – 1958 JACARANDA QUEEN

Media Questions and Activities

1. Think about how this documentary has been filmed, constructed and edited. Does it work as an engaging documentary? What techniques has Lawrence Johnstone used to achieve this?
2. Johnstone said of Grafton: *The people of this town are showing the most amazing community spirit and put in an incredible amount of hard work throughout the year to bring this week alive and help this town celebrate its identity.* Does Johnstone succeed in bringing this spirit to life in the film? How does he do this?
3. The documentary uses a combination of old footage, interviews, street scenes, shots of the festival and scenic views of the surrounding countryside. How powerful and effective is this combination? Is there any way that the impact could have been heightened by additional scenes or by different editing?
4. Do you believe that the director succeeds in making you feel positively and supportively about the Jacaranda Festival and the crowning of the Jacaranda Queen? Do you engage with the former queens and the people of Grafton? Do you finish watching the film wanting to know more about the people involved? Has it made you interested in visiting Grafton at the time of the Jacaranda festival?
5. Did the documentary hold your interest at all times? What was the highlight of the documentary? Was there a section or aspect that could have been left out? Was there another angle that could have been taken? Explain your answer.
6. Write a review of this documentary, to appear in a catalogue of educational films.

Essay Topics:

- 'It doesn't matter where you grow up, it is the people around you who will really determine whether your childhood is successful and happy.'
To what extent do you agree?
- Discuss the role of the annual festival in the general well-being and prosperity of a town, district or suburb.
- 'Without the beauty of nature we would have nothing to celebrate.'
Discuss

Topics for Debate:

- 'Rural Communities Care.'
- 'Feminism has changed nothing.'
- 'We all need festivals to give us a temporary respite from the humdrum of real life.'