



# The Mavis Furner Collection

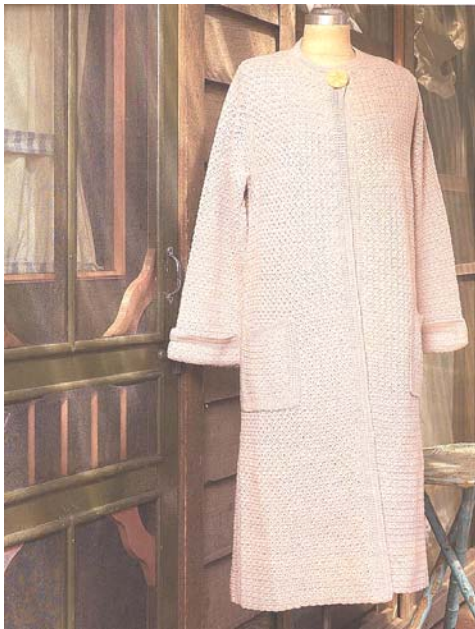
*Mavis Florence Furner*

10.5.1918 - 11.5.2006

An exquisite collection of over 200 crochet garments, accessories and photographs that interpret the life and experience of Mavis Furner and her work in the community of Coolamon

As a young girl in the 1920s, Mavis Furner remembers being taken to Coolamon's Up-to-Date Store by her mother to buy clothes. Centered in the Store's Millinery Showroom was a tall glass display cabinet that boasted "*a specially arranged interior exhibit of exquisite frocks and robes beautifully made...*"<sup>1</sup>. Mavis's fondest memory of those visits was of the occasion when her mother bought Mavis a pretty blue coat. It is fitting that the story of the Mavis Furner Collection commences with her spotting another beautiful coat...

Mavis first learnt to crochet at the age of 10 when she went to stay with her uncle and aunt, and "three girl cousins". She writes, "One day while I was there I was sitting on the front steps of the farmhouse watching my cousins doing some handwork and wishing I could do something. My aunt sat down beside me and asked me if I would like to learn to crochet. I was eager and soon learned the basic stitches."



This coat is the pride of the Mavis Furner Collection, made in 1959 after the designer spotted a similar one in a Manly boutique. After she made it, she became completely 'hooked' on crochet and went on to create over 200 hand-made garments.

The origins of the Mavis Furner Crochet Collection go back to 1959 in Manly, a popular holiday destination for country people at the time. Coolamon residents George and Mavis Furner treated themselves to many holidays there after the annual harvest but on this particular trip, Mavis spotted a bone-coloured, calf length, crocheted woollen coat in the window of a Manly boutique. On enquiring about it, she discovered it was handmade in Italy - and outrageously expensive. She wanted it badly, "but oh the price! I was so tempted," she exclaims. Although more than 40 years had passed since Mavis had plied a crochet hook, she thought, "Why couldn't I do that? Surely, if I could crochet a doily, I could crochet a coat".

Returning home she proceeded to make her own version of the coat. "I bought some 4-ply crepetta wool from Coles in Wagga Wagga," she recalls, "and it cost five pounds at the time. I set about it with crochet hook and tape measure to create a replica of the coat I had seen in Manly." She found the process of crocheting both enjoyable and gratifying and had the desire to keep going even after the coat was complete. It wasn't long before she had designed an entire wardrobe for herself, including all the essentials such as coats, casual frocks and formal evening dresses, suits and pants-suits.

Until a few years ago, Mavis would throw out any garments she no longer wanted – then her niece, Jan Lucas found out and quickly put a stop to it. Jan, together with friends Shirley Clark and Wendy Hucker began cataloguing the collection of coats, dresses, suits and pants-suits in 2003. Mavis's task was to recall what inspired the garment, where she bought the materials, where she wore it and any special memories they evoked. At 86 years old, she had no difficulty in answering any of the questions, but she was somewhat bemused at the attention her old wardrobe was receiving.

To Mavis, crochet was simply her hobby - as well as an affordable way to present herself to the community in a stylish and unique manner. "The craft has given me a great amount of joy," she writes in her recent memoirs, "and appreciation of the results of my efforts. I am satisfied." To the others, however, this collection represents a history of Coolamon as seen through the eyes of one of its prominent female citizens. In any case, Mavis agreed, "to go along with it".

<sup>1</sup> Coolamon Ganmain Farmers Review, 1922

Mavis developed a mastery of yarn in a league of her own and the handmade crocheted wardrobe she made was admired - and coveted - by friends and strangers alike.

She called her garments the 'friendly clothes' because wherever she travelled in the world, people would approach and compliment her on her outfits. Sometimes in foreign countries the compliments were in sign language.

In her production, Mavis proved herself to be both prolific and inventive. Her creations reveal a brilliant eye for colour and design, and many of them were made in timeless styles that remain fashionable to this day. She preferred clean, unfussy lines and the technical skill she displayed in achieving this is remarkable. She'd work pleats, shoulder pads and other well-placed seams into the designs so that they fitted better. She also knew what looked good on her and designed her pieces accordingly. "She never used a pattern or copied a garment from a book," explains Jan, "but she does admit to once using a neckline on a dress similar to one that Princess Diana wore." Mavis herself said, "I never needed a pattern, the wool would 'tell' me what to do. I like experimenting with combinations of colours and from there I began designing patterns of stitches - and again the combinations of colour. It was fascinating. Not only was it challenging to experiment with colours, it was also intriguing to mix combinations of yarns, sometimes with surprising results but mostly they were very satisfactory."

Mavis described her forebears as "civic-minded" and she was proud to carry on this family tradition by playing an active role in the community - whether it was assisting community organisations and events like the CWA, Miss Showgirl, the Centennial of Coolamon or through her participation in Bowls, Golf or attending a Rotary function. Ofcourse Mavis always looked immaculate in one of the outfits she handmade to her own design, many times specific for a special occasion.

Apart from the quality of the designs and workmanship of the garments, Mavis's supporters believe the collection is significant because she remembers so accurately the history of each of them. "One of the things that the collection does," says heritage consultant Kylie Winkworth, "is open the door on the social and cultural existence of a community and the life of one of its prominent citizens. Many women's lives are spent in service to their families and their communities," she goes on. "Traditionally, women worked in the home and also for numerous charitable and community causes, but this work typically leaves few memorials. In future years Mavis Furner's collection will be a wonderful research archive about the life of hardworking country women, and a way of remembering their service to the community."

Mavis' dream to see the collection housed in Coolamon's historic Up-to-Date Store was realised in 2006 when the collection was installed in the Store's Millinery Showroom - The very room from where her mother had purchased that pretty blue coat almost 80 years earlier. Mavis' legacy lives on in her creations and their narratives and continues to amaze all who visit the Up-to-Date Store.



Source - Tareyn Benham



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