

## **A Eulogy for Mary Dempsey (2/6/1917- 20/3/2008)**

Departed this life on Thursday 20<sup>th</sup> March 2008 at 2.30pm

*Written by Liz Morigan with input from each of Mary's children, some of her grandchildren and Mary's own writing.*

### **Part 1**

Mary was born on June 2<sup>nd</sup> 1917 in Ballarat. She was the 3<sup>rd</sup> child of Margaret Ellen Doherty and John Carrucan (a grandson of the original Patrick Carrucan who migrated from Ireland to Australia in 1856) and their first daughter. Her mother gave birth at home as she did for all but her last child. She was baptised Mary Cecilia Carrucan. Her mother was a nurse and her father was a farm manager. In Mary's own words:

*Dad was a hard worker and a very kind father, but mum was the business head of the family. She was the one who, somehow or other, saw that we all had a secondary education and had music lessons.*

She wondered in later life how her parents managed to do it.

Because of her father's work, Mary grew up in and around the grounds of several large mental asylums. There were many stories told and retold ..... involving the residents and life there.

Mary went to school at Wendouree State School with her sister Eileen who was born 2 years after Mary. Mary and Eileen were "good friends" growing up and very fond of each other as they were of each of their siblings.

When Mary was about 6 years old:

*... there was a terrible time (again in Mary's own words) when my eldest brother, Ivan, had his leg amputated in Melbourne and was four months in St. Vincent's and came home to a wheel bed. In the meantime, my mother had her sixth child, a girl, Irene Catherine Nora, who took convulsions and died at six weeks. Mum buried her and went back to Ivan in Melbourne. I can remember Con, who was the next eldest to me, making Mum cocoa, he would have been eight. I can remember him washing the kitchen floor and saying to us at the back door – "you're not coming in on my clean floor".*

"My clean floor" echoes over the years...

### **Part 2**

The Carrucan family moved to Beechworth in 1928 when Mary was 11 and now one of 5 children. In Beechworth, she was educated by the Brigidene sisters at St Joseph's. Despite set backs caused by illness, suspected TB, she completed her leaving certificate. She loved English and the humanities. Due to missing classes, she received one to one tuition from Sister Pious. They would sit side by side in the school desk.

### **Part 3**

When Mary finished school she joined the Public Service and trained as a telephonist with the PMG. During this time she made many life-long friends.

During a posting to Cheltenham post office, she met Walter Dempsey. Wal tells the story of seeing this little girl looking very nervous on her first day and wanting to reassure her that everything would be alright but he was too shy to speak to her. Eventually Wal got the courage and they started going out to the pictures together. But Mary wanted to get back to Ballarat to where her family had returned. She may have thought it was too early to settle down and she "had other fish to fry". Wal gained a posting in Ballarat and followed her.

With the support of Mary's mother, Wal eventually won Mary over and they became engaged in 1941 and married on 19th September 1942 at Sacred Heart Church in Kew. Her father had been transferred to the Kew Mental Asylum in the meantime.



*Mary Cecelia CARRUCAN married Walter McInnes DEMPSEY at Kew in Melbourne in 1942. The photo shows Eileen O'Sullivan nee Carrucan (bridesmaid), Wal and Mary, John Carrucan (Mary's father) and Tom Kelly*

#### **Part 4**

Initially Mary and Wal lived in a flat on Bulla Rd Essendon. Mum often told the story of the oven there: she opened it once was horrified by what she saw, closed the door and never opened it for the rest of the 9 months they lived there. It seems the landlady didn't like children either! So they had to move to other accommodation when Peter was born in December 1943.

Wal was posted to Hobart in the winter of 1944 (coldest) and while living in Cambridge Mum gave birth to 2 more children: Mary in 1946 and Margaret in 1949. Just before Margaret's birth, Mary's brother Con drowned while out duck shooting at Patho where he was school teacher. Con Carrucan left behind his wife, Clare and two small children: Helen and Frank. Helen Carrucan treasures the memory of Mary's care for her and Frank over the years: how Mary would have them stay during school holidays; two more children in an already child filled household.

While in Cambridge, Mary learned to drive which would have been unusual for a woman then. She and Wal may have been unusual in more than a few ways: Peter recalls the story told by Mum of him coming home from school and saying other kids call their parents "Mum" and "Dad". He used their first names: Mary and Wal.

Mary made more friends in Cambridge. I recall the scene from one of Mary's stories of women meeting in one of their kitchens, babies on laps, teapot handy and the older children joining them after school. Then each mother putting a saucepan of vegetables on the wood stove for the children's dinner as the early night of Hobart closed in.

## **Part 5**

St Francis de Sales Oak Park. "Our teenage years"

Wal was posted back to Melbourne just before their 4<sup>th</sup> child was born. Mum spent some time living in a bungalow at her mother's house in Kew (3 littlies and another imminent) and then moved into the house they had bought at 568 Pascoe Vale Rd without waiting for the furniture held up by a wharfies strike. This two bedroom house expanded to fit a growing family, their friends, church fund raising events, parties, and summer fruit bottling and jam making. The back yard accommodated a huge vegetable garden, fruit trees, chooks, and a rotary clothes line that was constantly in service.

On the subject of washing: one of the favourite stories of many of the grandchildren is about Mary going to a sale at Treadways (a large department store in Melbourne). She approached the counter and enquired about underpants. When the shop assistant asked: 'What size madam?' Mum replied: 'Bring them all out, I've got **bums** to fit all sizes!'

When Nannan (Mary's mother) came to visit we all had to be on our best behaviour! The lounge room was cleaned within an inch of its life, the dining room table was cleared, dusted and polished. Even the piano was subjected to scrutiny. Cups and saucers from the "crystal cabinet" were matched up and arranged. The best teapot and afternoon tea! These visits were thoroughly enjoyed but once the visitors had left, Mum and the girls would relax over a non-visitors cuppa.

As her children grew up, Mary became more involved in church activities and played a significant role in the building of local parishes especially the parish of St Francis de Sales, Oak Park. She made firm and life long friends including Beryl Breadsell, Joyce Goodair and Fr James Atkins who was the first parish priest of St Francis de Sales. Fr Atkins became part of the family, sharing a regular Monday evening meal, outings to the beach and introducing the young women of the family to the joys of restaurant dining. Wal would sit back quietly as all hell broke loose around the table with girls teasing priest, priest teasing girls and Mum's reminder of: don't touch him he's a priest!

Mary worked hard in the parish: she was secretary of the Ladies Auxiliary, a leading member of the choir, Altar Society, etc and she held the secretary position on the first Parish Council. Many would say she build that church brick by brick!

When Mary and Wal's 8<sup>th</sup> child was born in 1963, they faced a new challenge: to raise a child with Downs Syndrome in a time when there was little official support or

understanding and no services. After initial devastation, Mary grasped the nettle despite pressure otherwise. The efforts made to get food into Con, to make him live, were a hallmark of our lives that year. We'd come home from school and hear reports of how much Con had drunk / eaten / gained. Margaret recalls a visit to the GP when Mary was told Con would never walk. Mary banged her hand on the desk saying "well he damn well will walk because I can't carry him forever".

Con says one of the things he misses about Mum is her cooking! The best vegies and custard in town!

PAUSE

There was always room for one more! Throw another cup of water in the soup! Put a few extra potatoes on! Wal would come home from late shift and swim through a kitchen of friends.

Eileen recalls coming back from a YCS meeting with a group of friends who all insisted on coming in with her since it was her 16<sup>th</sup> birthday and they thought it should be celebrated. When they asked "Where's the cake?" Mary proceeded to improvise: taking a large slice of bread, she buttered it, sprinkled it with 100's and 1000's applied a candle or two while they sang Happy Birthday and then cut the bread into the requisite number of pieces! A birthday cake!

Catherine remembers Mum's attention to the many requests for help with school work and clothes for parties/dances. Mum would have a go at anything. When Catherine started at a new school, she had to knit a school scarf emblem and all. Mum would regularly fix up the mistakes and then do a few extra rows.

Trips..

Holidays were NOT a feature of life at "568" although there were opportunities to stay with Eileen and Jack O'Sullivan, Maloney's, Auntie and Nora and the Chapman's especially when another baby was due.

But Mary and Wal really needed a holiday. Their way of having a holiday was to pack the current car (no four wheel drive for them!) with maps, a mattress, a box of clothes each, a box of food, a kerosene tin for a stove and head off! The older ones were left in charge at home and things ran pretty smoothly. But we didn't always know where Mum and Dad had gone!

Young Mary recalls one of these trips to Alice Springs for the weekend. Mary and Wal were caught in the rain and Mary walked ahead of the car checking the depth of the water before Wal drove through it!

On another trip when Dad was 80 and Mum was 73: they said they were going north! They ended up in Karumba in the Gulf of Carpentaria!

## **Part 6**

With the move to Willett Ave in 1970 came weddings and grandchildren. The house was chosen to fit us all in and then we started leaving home! Peter and Sue went to live in New Guinea and Peter tells the story of one of Mum's visits: Mum was fearful of flying but went anyway. While there she found herself at the mercy of a light aircraft pilot swooping and diving to get a better look at a war time wreck during a

flight to Garina. She really appreciated the ONE cold beer upon arrival at the Lutheran Mission, their destination!

### **Part 7**

The noise and air quality of Melbourne and Dad's retirement led to another move at the age of 58. Mary left her friends, her parish and her life there and started again! The destination was informed by climate and schooling for the 2 children still at home. Con needed "Special education" and Bendigo had what was needed. Mary also had to contend with a very stropky teenage daughter who was also losing her friends and school.

Carmel reflects on Mum's patience and understanding with her during this time and when Mum found out that Carmel had wagged school she confronted her. On hearing Carmel tearfully say: "I don't like this place", they both cried! And Carmel did not get into the trouble she expected.

Mary and Wal and Con (and Carmel) lived in Marong for 30 years. During this time, Mum made new friends especially her card friends; she got involved in yet another parish and was a catechist in the local state school, she and Wal were on the cleaning roster and Mary was a regular reader. Often Mary and Wal were the only attendants at Mass during the week.

Highlights for Mary at this stage of her life were pilgrimages with the "Mons", Monsignor Toomey, to Rome, the Holy Land, Lourdes and the Eucharistic Congress in Nairobi.

Mary was excited about the Pope's visit to Australia and having lost their way in the throng at the Papal Mass at Flemington Racecourse, they ended up close to the front with a contingent of priests, after one recognised her.

Children, even grown up children, may think of their parents' relationship as purely platonic and that the children were the result of divine intervention. The Dempsey children were no exception. Dad didn't say much back then. It seemed to us he was the behind the scenes person of the drama of life in the Dempsey family. Mary made it clear during serious conversations that Dad had input into every decision and that although she did the speaking, Dad was much more than the silent partner.

Carmel's more recent observation and reflection tells more of the story. She saw the look of delight on Dad's face when he welcomed Mum back from home from another stay in hospital and realised that "they were in love!"

### **Part 8**

Mary and Wal moved to Bethlehem in 2006. It may have been one of their most difficult decisions. Wal was a bit lost but Mary was able to lose herself in a good book for hours. She would make herself leave the reading in order to be company for Wal. When her eyesight failed it was very painful to witness this LOSS of reading. She was NOT interested in alternatives: being read to, tapes etc. It was independent private reading that had been her interest, her passion.

Mary and Wal transferred to Templestowe Pioneers Village in 2007, which enabled more frequent visits from the extended family. At TPV she made new friends and was looked after very well by the caring staff.

Even in the last week her independence and strength showed through; giving orders to Dad and the rest of us!

We remember Mary Dempsey and her rich life, full of friends, family and strong faith.... with thanks.



*1997 – Mary (centre) celebrates her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday with her sister Eileen O'Sullivan nee Carrucan (left) and friend Connie Rice nee Maher (right)*