

BETTY ERICKSON (nee CARRUCAN)

Elizabeth Agatha (Betty) Carrucan was born on December 28, 1915, in Eltham which was, at that time, a small farming village.

Her father, Michael Carrucan, was of the Carrucan clan who settled in Eltham in the 1850s. Her mother, Mary Sweeney, was the granddaughter of Captain Thomas Sweeney who was the first freehold settler in the Eltham district (he came to Melbourne in 1838 and applied to purchase 110 acres in Nillimbik in 1842). Both sides of the family were proudly Irish and proudly Catholic.

Betty was the youngest of three children and the family were subsistence farmers. Their farm in Dalton Street was mixed, having cattle, poultry and an orchard. Times were hard at Betty grew up and her two older brothers, Patrick and Jack, along with their cousin Ken (who was brought up with them) had to leave school and find gainful employment after finishing Eltham Higher Elementary School.

Everyone had to fulfil allotted tasks on the farm and, as a girl, Betty had to look after the poultry. She looked upon this task with great distain and harboured a lasting dislike of chooks throughout her life. In her later years at Heidelberg, she duly took her grandchildren next door to see the 'chookies' but little did they realize her behind-the-scenes thoughts.

Betty was, even in those early days, a person of outstanding potential and personality and stood out as a pupil as she progressed through Eltham Elementary School.



Grades 1 & 2, Eltham Primary School, 1921; Betty is fourth from the left in the second row from the front.

The Advertiser of November 24, 1931 reported in length on the Eltham Higher Elementary School Prize night

Mr. Stewart presented The Rhodes Ideal girls' prize, which was presented for the first time this year. This medal was donated by Mr. and Mrs. E. Smithers, to be awarded on the same basis as the medal which has been presented to the boys by Mr. A. Smithers for some years past. The winning of this medal demands not only scholastic attainment but also those other qualities that

go towards making desirable citizens subh as efficiency in sport, bearing and character. The announcement the that award had been won by Betty Carrucan was a popular one.



The medal was engraved simply on the front with the letters EHES in flourishing script.



The back was engraved

ELTHAM HES
 "THE IDEAL" 1931
 E. A. CARRUCAN

A scholarship enabled her to continue her schooling at Melbourne Girls High School (later to become McRobertson's Girls High School) but it was not a unanimous family decision. It was a credit to her father, himself an uneducated man, that he made his own decision and gave her his blessing.



MAGAZINE COMMITTEE

Standing (left to right): Betty Carrucan, Eugene Platts, Elinor Thomas, Gertrude Rabinov, Ethel Mann, Joyce Dawson, Gertrude Reilly. Sitting: Nada Hunter, Olive Armour, Mollie Sandford (Co-Editress), Hope Whiffin (Co-Editress), Joyce Coloe. Absent: Nanie Dawson.

MGHS Magazine Committee, 1933 – Betty is back left.

The following short essay was published in the December 1933 edition of PALLAS, the MGHS magazine.

A TREATISE ON LOCKER ROOMS.

"M.L.M."

Naturally, when the transference from Government House to our present location was actually effected, one absorbing topic of conversation was the locker rooms. The stalwart frame of those fortunates who had revelled in the possession of top lockers were shaken with apprehension, lest an undignified descent from Olympian heights to the lower regions should befall them. But hope stirred in the hearts of those who had been experiencing the doubtful pleasures attendant upon bottom lockers - grovelling on the floor, the recipient of innumerable jogs, blows and avalanches of books and so forth.

Ah me! Woeful reminiscences! Dashed hopes! Who will cease to recall without spinal convulsions that terrible week during which A and B forms were confined to one locker room. Dear me! Can that struggling, seething mass of frenzied humanity be composed of the dignified maidens of A, the studious virgins of B. Well! well! As Milton so wittily remarks (or was it the optimistic Shakespeare?) "How charming is divine philosophy." For after all, who would not prefer the solace, the tranquillity of a congested locker room, with the addition of such thrills as a narrow escape from impalement on coat-hooks, or headlong descent of the staircase, to carrying one's scholarly apparatus over the country side all day, in a portmanteau, or, worse still, clasped tenderly in the arms.

What fatal discrepancies do oft occur, separating the existing state of affairs from the ideal. Standing in the middle of that locker room, I was so rash as to close my eyes and cover my ears. Then did I conjure up a soothing vision of girls, standing at attention, in orderly lines, each awaiting her turn to approach her locker. No clamor! No disorder! All was politeness and patience. Smiling beatifically, I ventured to look around me once more, that charming image lingering in my mind. Ah me! Bedlam! And, horrid fact, numerous Irate damsels gesticulating angrily, waving particles of food in a menacing manner, declaring that I was blocking the passage. Ah Milton! How charming is divine philosophy. What may have been the climax I dare not imagine, but that the awesome form of a prefect appeared. How her sonorous voice resounded through the vaulted arches, as she carolled, "Clear the locker-room, please!" The girls filed meekly out, quailing under the eagle eye of that minion of the law.

Let our conclusion be of the true lyrical type, permeated with hope, and calm serenity. I am now situated in an airy common room, the proud possessor of a top locker. The maidens about me are noted for their genteel deportment and impeccable manners. Liltng strains come floating over from the grand piano near by. Bliss! How truly delightful an environment.

B. Carrucan

After an outstanding school career, she was awarded the Newman College Exhibition and a Senior Government Scholarship to attend Melbourne University. The announcement of the Government Scholarship winners (40 in total) was as follows

Each year a number of scholarships is awarded by the Education Department on the recommendation of a board of selectors to senior pupils of high and elementary schools. The recommendations are based mainly on the age, school records and suitability of the candidates. In addition, the selectors give whatever consideration they think fit to any difficulties the candidates had to overcome by reason of family circumstances or school environment. The scholarships are tenable at the University in approved courses and carry an allowance of \$40 a year towards fees and other expenses.

Amongst the list of names was Elizabeth A. Carrucan (M.G.H.S.)



Betty's graduation photo Melbourne Girls High School - 1934

Thus she became the first girl from Eltham Higher Elementary School (and perhaps from Eltham overall) to attend University.

While at University, she taught her father to read and write. It was not easy going for her by any means. She studied each night under the light of a hurricane lamp in the back room of the Eltham farmhouse and encountered considerable opposition to her studies from the old Irish relatives who saw no place in a girl's life for a higher education.

As the depression set in with the thirties, she was forced to leave university for a year and work as the infant mistress at the Gold Street Primary School in Clifton Hill to help the family finances.

She went back to university after a year and graduated in 1938 with a B.A. Honours degree. In her graduating year were such luminaries as Sir Zelman Cowan (later to become Governor General of Australia) and B. A. (Bob) Santamaria.

Career opportunities for women were few at that time and Betty embarked on a teaching career. As was the case in those days, her first teaching appointments were in the country regions. She spent a few years at each of Korrumburra, Leongatha, Wangaratta and Stawell. In later years, she attended a reunion of Wangaratta High School former students and teachers. It revived a number of friendships and she was remembered with much esteem by her former students of some 40+ years past.



1946 – Stawall High School basketball team

While teaching at Stawell, she met a migrant Swedish miner, Gunnar Eric (Eric) Erickson, and they married in 1946. She soon gave up teaching to start a family and followed Eric as he moved with the mining to Captains Flat near Canberra and on to the Snowy Mountains Scheme, then in its early years. He two oldest children, Michael and Terence, were born in the primitive and tough conditions of these mining towns.



Marriage of Betty Carrucan and Eric Erickson, 2nd July 1946

She returned to Eltham in 1950, expecting a third child (Timothy) who was born in November. She then stayed on at the family farm at Eltham with her three young boys, relying on the good will of her family who were still relatively poor farmers. Her brother Jack worked as a moulder and helped her through this period.

Around this time her health started to deteriorate and bad circulation in her legs became a recurring problem. She spent most of one year in the Royal Melbourne Hospital and, at one stage, looked likely to

lose both her legs. She would not give in and eventually got back on her feet, gathered her boys back as a family and went back to work.

In those days, married women were not allowed to teach but she was able to get a part-time teaching position at Eltham High School through the intervention of Harry Moody, the principal, who had taught with her in the country. Her legs were still very bad and only her will to keep her family together kept her going.

In 1958 she took her boys to Queenstown in Tasmania where her husband was working as an engineer with the Mt Lyell Copper Mines and she taught in the Queenstown School for Mines while there.



1958 in Queenstown – Terry, Tim, Mick and Betty

After a year, she returned to Eltham as her mother was very ill and the climate in Tasmania was too cold for her circulation. She taught at Heidelberg High School and stayed at Eltham until her mother died in 1961.

In 1961, she moved to Thomastown with the boys and they lived in an old condemned Education Department house in the grounds of Thomastown Primary School. She continued to teach at Heidelberg High School and sent the boys to school at St John's School in Heidelberg. The old house had no hot water and very few of the amenities we regard as normal in these days. But it was a home and was often filled with parties and people as Betty was always a very social person who attracted many friends and admirers. She could always be found in the middle of a group holding the floor with cigarette in hand.

My boyhood memories are filled with her many friends who were always wandering into and out of our place, wherever it was. There were many people who helped her in many ways during the time when we were growing up.

In 1962, Betty moved with her family to the Housing Commission area of West Heidelberg and started teaching at Banyule High School. Later that year, she moved to a ramshackle house in Cape St in Heidelberg where she lived for the next 28 years. Finally she had entered a period of stability and proceeded to bring up her family of three active boys as best she could.

Her legs were still bad and lengthy periods in hospital during the next few years saw us farmed out to various friends for periods of up to three months at a time. Betty took up coaching at weekend to earn extra finance to keep a growing family of three boys in food and clothes. She coached a succession of students over most of the weekend and spent her nights correcting English essays and the like for her normal classes and her coaching students.

Whenever I came out from my bedroom during the night, mum would be found correcting work at the table or dozing in her favourite chair behind the gas fire. She never bothered going to bed. In fact, this led to her once falling off her chair while dozing, resulting in a broken nose. She always saw the humour in such things.

Her teaching continued. She moved from Banyule High School to Heidelberg Girls School and from there to Preston East High School where she spent seven years as Senior Mistress. She found this a very demanding school with many problems to be tackled in a depressed social environment. Yet, this was perhaps the school that she most talked about in later years. She had many continuing friendships with both former students and fellow teachers.

In 1975 she left Preston East High School to look after her brother Jack who was seriously ill. It was our uncle Jack who had fulfilled many of the tasks of a father to us over many years and the relationship between him and mum was too special to put into words.

When he died after a short but very distressing illness, mum went back to work at Banyule East High School for one term and then took on the job of Vice Principal at Coburg High School. She attacked this job with her usual enthusiasm and her working day extended from 7.30 AM to 5:30 PM. She lost so much weight during her time at Coburg High School that we were all worried that she had taken on too hard a task. But she was never one to let any task beat her and she carried it through to completion.

She retired in 1978 at age 62 to look after her brother Pat who was recovering from a very serious heart attack. She was still keen to contribute so worked for the next four years teaching HSC English in the night school at Coburg High School. She finally retired from teaching in 1982 after a career spanning 44 years.

Retirement for mum meant the chance to do all the things previously denied to her by a tough family and work lifestyle. She entered into such activities as a film circle, a reading circle, membership of Heidelberg, membership of the Catholic Womens League (of which she became editor of their magazine *Horizon* and a life member), a more active role in St John's Parish, membership in the Heidelberg branch of the Soroptimists and so on. The full list would be large indeed.

Finally freed of financial constraints, her generosity towards all charities and to anyone in need was given full reign. Her idea was to use money rather than amass it and she gave freely to all in need. She felt no need for worldly possessions. Indeed most presents given to her were recycled to others. As a son, it was difficult to give her anything that would not be passed on.

She also travelled widely at this stage, seeing Europe with her old friend Jean Wilson, visiting Terry first in New Guinea and then in Darwin and making innumerable trips to see Mick on his farm.



Betty in New Guinea with her son Terry in 1984

Her list of friends was large indeed. I always found it amazing how many people came to see her all through her life. All her friendships were lasting - a tribute to her warmth and personal charisma. When she died on 6th March 1990 after a battle with cancer, the funeral mass of over 300 people bore witness to her deep impact on many people.

Her challenges during her life were many but her faith always kept her going. She was surely one who fulfilled her potential and triumphed over all adversity. Yet she remained a humble person who talked little of her hard times, preferring to look at the good to be gained from any situation. She cried along with many people and stood alongside many as they faced crises.

She was one of those special people whom we meet rarely in our lives. Her memory will live on in my thoughts. Her stories will continue to pop up in my mind. Her special mastery of the English language will always be with me. Her humour and warmth and charity and wit and concern and faith and hope and love form a lasting tribute to her life.

May she rest in peace.

Tim Erickson