

BETTY ERICKSON

Born 28 December 1915

Died 6 March 1990

Requiescat In Pace



**The family of the late
Betty Erickson
wish to convey to her many kind
and loving friends their deep
appreciation of the expressions
of sympathy and comfort
received upon the sad occasion of
her recent passing from this life.**

Betty Erickson was born on December 28, 1915 in Eltham. Eltham was at that time a small farming village and she was born into a farming family of Irish ancestry.

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 white settler in the Eltham district in 1837. The original Sweeney property at Culla Hill (overlooking the Yarra) has long since been subdivided but the original homestead is still in existence (although modernized and rebuilt) in Sweeney's Lane.

Mum was the youngest of three children and her family were subsistence farmers. Their farm in Dalton St was mixed, having cattle, poultry and an orchard. Times were hard as mum grew up and both her older brothers, Patrick and Jack, along with her cousin Ken (who was brought up with them) had to leave school after finishing Eltham Elementary School and start working.

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

Mum was, even in those early days, a person of outstanding potential and personality. She went through Eltham Primary School and went on to Eltham Higher Elementary School where she graduated as dux. This enabled her to continue her education.

She went on to Melbourne Girls High School (later to become McRobertson's Girls High School) and, after an outstanding school career, was awarded the Newman College Exhibition and a Senior Government Scholarship to attend Melbourne University. Thus she became the first Eltham girl 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 in 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 Bob Santamaria.

Career opportunities for women were few at that time and mum 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 recent 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.

While teaching in Stawell, she met a migrant Swedish miner, Eric, 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. Her three sons were born in the primitive and tough conditions of these mining towns.

She returned to Eltham in the early 1950's with us young boys after her marriage failed. She lived on the family farm at Eltham once again and had to rely on the good will of her family who were still poor farmers. Her brother Jack worked as a moulder and helped mum through hard times.

At this time, her health started to deteriorate and bad circulation in her legs became a recurring problem. She was most of one year in the Royal Melbourne Hospital and at one stage, looked certain to lose both her legs. She would not give in and eventually got back on her feet, gathered us boys back together 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 us together kept her going.

In 1958 she took us to Queenstown in Tasmania where her husband was working as an engineer with the Mt Lyell Copper Mines. She taught in the Queenstown School of Mines during her stay in Tasmania.

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

In 1961 she moved to Thomastown and we lived in an old condemned Education Department house in the grounds of the Thomastown Primary School. She continued to teach at Heidelberg High School and sent us to 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 mum 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 in 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, we moved to the Housing Commission area of West Heidelberg and mum started teaching at Banyule High School. Later in 1962, we moved to our Cape Street house where mum lived for the next 28 years. Finally she entered a period of stability and proceeded to bring us up 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 3 months at a time. Mum took up coaching at the weekends to make some 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 school classes and her coaching students.

Whenever I came out from my bedroom during the night, mum would always be found correcting work at the table or dozing in her favourite chair beside 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. Mum 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 Heidelcare, 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 to others.

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. The funeral mass of over 300 people bears witness to her deep impact on many people.

Her battles 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 will form a lasting tribute to her life.

May she rest in peace.

Tim