

OPEN FOUNDATION 1986

AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

RESEARCH ASSIGNMENT:

"Women Who Dared" -

Report of an interview with
Sister Constance Casey, R.S.M.

DATE OF PRESENTATION:

28th October, 1986.

STUDENT: Mary Guy

TUESDAY NIGHT

7 p.m. - 9 p.m.

The focus of this report is a recent interview with Sister Constance Casey, a Sister of Mercy, who was one of the founding religious Nursing Sisters of the Mater Misericordiae Hospital which was established at Waratah in 1921. Questions asked were designed to cover the first six years of the hospital's development and to supplement information on this period already obtained from archival records preserved at the Convent. The data thus gathered is presented within the context of the history of Newcastle at that time.

At the beginning of the twentieth century "coalmining was the source of all work in Newcastle."¹ Retail, railways and construction depended heavily on it, so when the demand for coal on a worldwide basis was lowered, Newcastle became affected as it meant that the miners often worked only a few days a week; this in turn affected all allied employment such as that of waterside workers, railway workers and coal trimmers. Later there was an attempt by mine owners to lower the price of coal leading to confrontation with the unions and subsequent lockouts by the mine owners. Mines in the Newcastle area began to close as their supply petered out and the town's population declined as miners and their families moved further up the Hunter Valley to the towns of Kurri, Cessnock and Branxton² where new mines had opened.

As the depression in the coal industry worsened, the Broken Hill Proprietary Limited Company purchased land on the banks of the Hunter River at Mayfield and began building an iron and steel works in 1913. Newcastle had been chosen on account of the proximity of coal supply, abundant labour and a harbour, although the harbour was always silting up and had to be dredged at regular intervals then as it has today. These steelworks were seen as the saviour for the town and with the advent of World War 1 they prospered as part of the War effort. Allied industries such as Lysaghts, Rylands and the Commonwealth Steel Company at Waratah also commenced operations.³

After the War, however, another problem presented itself to the new iron and steel industry. There was a lessening demand for steel, resulting in high production costs and overseas dumping

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1. J.C. Docherty, Newcastle - The Making of an Australian City. Sydney, 1983, p.51.
 2. Sheilah Gray, Newcastle in the Great Depression. Newcastle, 1984, pp. 11,12.
 3. ibid., p.12.

of iron and steel supplies. Newcastle was again facing a recession as large numbers of returned servicemen increased the already large number of unemployed.¹ This was Newcastle's economic climate when the Mater Hospital was established at Waratah.

As a suburb in the early 1900's Waratah has been described as a "favourite residential suburb for city business people and many fine private buildings are erected within its bounds."² It has already been mentioned that the Commonwealth Steel Company had chosen Waratah for the site of its operations in 1919. This promoted the growth of the suburb as many of the workers settled in the area. In 1920 a large home, 'Enmore Hall' in Edith Street, Waratah, was advertised for sale and thus the story of the Mater Misericordiae Hospital begins to unfold.

The Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy was established in Dublin, Ireland, in 1831 by Catherine McAuley, a rich heiress who used her fortune to build a House of Mercy in Baggott Street where the spiritual and corporal works of mercy could be carried out. In the anti-Catholic atmosphere of Ireland at that time unemployment, poverty and malnutrition were facts of life; sanitation, medical care, adequate housing and social conditions were immense problems. Catherine had not intended becoming a religious but her House of Mercy and the works carried out for the poor helped her to become one. She remarked towards the end of her life: "All I wanted to do was to serve the poor."³ Catherine was a woman of her time, acting with great prudence and foresight. Her nuns became known as the 'Walking Nuns' because they were in the streets and in the homes of the poor, giving relief outside the oppressive Poor Law System.⁴ Indeed, her 'Walking Nuns' distributing meals on foot were the "forerunners of today's more sophisticated Meals on Wheels services. Her system of visitation has developed into modern home nursing and the house she opened in Baggot Street was at once a school, an orphanage, a hostel, a night refuge...in short, a hospice for the world."⁵

Following the traditions of Mercy established in Ireland, a band of Sisters came from Ennis to establish their Congregation in Singleton in 1875 at the invitation of the Bishop of Maitland. For

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1. Sheilah Gray, Newcastle..., p. 12.

2. J.C. Docherty, Newcastle..., p. 107.

3. Angela Bolster, Catherine McAuley in Her Own Words. Dublin, 1978, p.30

4. ibid., p. 12.

5. loc. cit.

forty-five years they worked in the schools and the orphanage which they set up but the opportunity to care for the sick did not present itself until 1920 when the parish priest of Waratah, Father H. O'Laverty, was being visited by a friend, Father Tighe, a Jesuit priest from North Sydney. Father Tighe had had contact with the Sisters of Mercy at the Mater Hospital at North Sydney and was aware of the great work being carried out there. So he suggested that a hospital be commenced in Newcastle and that the empty house in Edith Street, at that time up for sale, would be a good site for the project. Mother Mary Magdalen Meaney was the Superior General of the Congregation at that time. She had herself come from Ireland to join the Sisters of Mercy to nurse the sick, but Mother Mary Stanislaus Kenny, who was the foundress of the Singleton Sisters of Mercy, told her that one day there would be a hospital. So Mother Mary Magdalen was delighted when approached by Father O'Laverty; her hope was at last to be fulfilled. She personally inspected the site before approaching Bishop Dwyer for the necessary permission.¹

Sister Constance Casey, 91 years old in October this year, is an alert old lady, who has dedicated seventy-one years of her life to the service of the Lord in the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy. She has spent sixty-five of those years nursing and caring for the sick and since her retirement has visited the patients in the wards helping with any problems within her capacity. She still lives at the Convent in the Mater Hospital complex and takes a keen interest in all aspects of the hospital's life although she is somewhat restricted by a severe hearing problem.

Born on a dairy farm at Kayuga (just outside Muswellbrook), she was the second eldest in a family of twelve. Prior to joining the Sisters of Mercy at Singleton in 1915 she spent two years nursing at the Mater Hospital at North Sydney, so that when the six Sisters were being selected to establish the hospital at Waratah, her nursing experience made her an obvious choice.

Memories of those early years are still very vivid: the sheer hard work and the poverty not only of the religious congregation to which she belonged but also of the patients in her care. Nursing sixty-five years ago was vastly different from what it is today. None of the nuns had trained as nurses so when the first patient was admitted on December 8th, 1921, they commenced their training under the watchful eye of Matron Short, then of Sister Golden and finally of Matron Gallagher, who was the administrator of the

small hospital until the Sisters' training was completed and Registration achieved.

Forty beds were available for patients: twenty three in the General wards and seventeen in eight smaller rooms. The other hospitals which were already functioning in Newcastle operated with the help of miners' co-operative systems whereby people paid into a central fund each week in return for medical and hospital care. When questioned on this aspect, Sister Constance said that scheme did not operate at the Mater; fees obtained from the paying patients helped cover those who had no means of payment. In the economic climate of the early 1920's poverty was never very far from the Hospital's doors but no one seeking help was turned away.

In those days the religious habits of the nuns were made of black serge and also had a train. It was very difficult for the nursing nuns to break this long tradition and obtain permission from their superiors to wear white habits while working in the hospital. In fact, for some time they had to wear the white habit over the black, making their physical work very difficult. Finally, permission was given for the black habits to be discarded and for only white to be worn while nursing.

Food was in short supply. Sister Constance tells of only bread and jam for breakfast and tea, with some vegetables for dinner. There was a strawberry patch near the Convent which apparently gave the nuns a change in diet when in season. However, Sister laughed when relating how one day, when investigating the gradual mysterious disappearance of the strawberries, she discovered that a rabbit was the culprit! For despite those hard times experienced there was a great spirit among the nuns and other staff and Sister Constance cherishes wonderful memories of those early days.

The Waratah of that period still had a rural aspect about it. Sister Constance tells of the operation of the local Abattoir and the Commonwealth Steel Company. The long association the Mater Hospital has experienced with these and other industries in the district commenced in those early days as men injured in industrial accidents were brought to the hospital for treatment.

A feature of the hospital's policy from its beginning has been provision for the spiritual needs of the patients through

free access to ministers of all religions.

It seems fitting that at least one member of that courageous pioneer band of nuns has lived long enough to witness the vast expansion of the hospital's present buildings and services. The seed sown in those early years has been watered by the hard work of succeeding generations of Sisters of Mercy, who have been assisted by dedicated lay staff, voluntary workers and the general public of Newcastle.

B I B L I O G R A P H Y

PRIMARY SOURCES

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