

a centenary of canberra's catholics

In the second in a series of portraits of significant Catholics of the national capital, 2009 Canberra Citizen of the Year Bishop Pat Power looks at Sylvia Curley.

Formidable lady's three careers shaped a growing city

If Sylvia Curley had lived a few more months, her life would have touched on three centuries and two millennia.

Sadly, she died (rather unexpectedly!) on 24 March 1999, aged 100. I had celebrated a Mass at St Christopher's Cathedral for her 100th birthday on 7 November the previous year. The Mass was attended by then Chief Minister Kate Carnell and MLAs Bill Stefaniak and Bill Wood and a congregation of 350.

Reporting the Mass next day (the actual birthday), the Canberra Times noted that messages had come from the Queen, the Prime Minister, John Howard, and the Governor-General, Sir William Deane. "Miss Curley said, with a touch of whimsy, that she would have liked a message from the Queen Mother, whom she had met and who is two years her junior."

Sylvia Curley records in her memoirs, *A Long Journey*, written in her 100th year that her family was fortunate in being able to attend three important events: the naming of Canberra by Lady Denman and the laying of the Foundation Stone in 1913, the visit of the Prince of Wales in 1920 and the opening of Parliament in May 1927.

Her memoirs record the excitement in the family when on the occasion of the opening of Parliament, her parents along with two other couples, all ex-employees of Duntroon estate, were presented to the Duke and Duchess of York, later to become King George VI and the Queen Mother. Sylvia and her sisters, Ada and Evelyn, also received invitations.

Dame Nellie Melba (then referred to as Madam Melba) sang and knowing the future Queen Mother's love for horses, Sylvia speculated on her joy at seeing the display by the Mounted Police.

She provides an anecdote which may otherwise have been lost to history: "During the latter part of the display by the Mounted Police another event occurred. Walking up from the Hotel Canberra, a traveller came into view.

"The traveller had a swag, carried a billy can and was followed by his little dog. The police and security guards seemed surprised but remained to attention. The traveller slowly walked to the official party, tipped his hat and bent his head and walked on to his destination. The traveller was an Aboriginal man showing his respect for the Royal Couple. I felt proud and the entire crowd of visitors showed their appreciation for his courtesies."

Patrick and Annie Elizabeth Curley (nee Tong) had three daughters, Ada, Sylvia and Evelyn, all born at Duntroon. Patrick's family had settled in Duntroon in 1857 and Annie Elizabeth Tong was born at Cuppacumbalong in 1869.

The family moved to Mugga Mugga in 1913. Patrick Curley and Charles Edlington were the last employees of Duntroon estate when the Commonwealth Government resumed the land for the establishment of the National Capital.

The Curley family home in Mugga Mugga was among a group of buildings which dated back to 1838. No wonder Sylvia



Sylvia Curley as a first-year nurse (above) and receiving a presentation on retirement from the Royal Canberra Hospital in 1966 (below). Pictures from the book *A Long Journey* by Sylvia Curley.



Curley had such a passion for Canberra and its heritage. Driving today from Duntroon to Mugga Mugga beside Hindmarsh Drive the road crosses Sylvia Curley Bridge at Dairy Flat.

Sylvia Curley left Canberra to begin a career in nursing, commencing her training at Leeton Hospital in 1923 and graduating in 1929.

After two stints as matron at Gundagai Hospital she returned to Canberra in 1938 as deputy matron of what was to become Royal Canberra Hospital. She occupied that position till her retirement from nursing in 1966.

Her plaque on the ACT Honour Walk in Canberra City states that "she fought tirelessly for excellence in patient care and left a legacy of improved training and educational facilities for Canberra's nurses, dentists and medical practitioners."

Her contribution to Canberra's nursing profession was recognised on 17 April, 1964, when Dame Pattie Menzies opened Sylvia Curley House as the new nurses' residence at Canberra Hospital. A former Duntroon cadet recalls Sister Curley keeping a close eye on the cadets showing an interest in her nurses.

A Long Journey records Sylvia Curley's three careers. Her second was to begin when she opened an employment agency in Manuka.

She spoke of leaving nursing without any superannuation and refusing to go on the pension. Her employment agency would not attempt to compete with other larger agencies in Canberra, but rather was to cater for a niche market where Miss Curley gave personalised training to her potential clients helping them to be equipped for the particular position they were about to fill.

In many ways, she provided a type of "finishing school" especially for younger women seeking employment. Her nursing background proved invaluable for positions such as doctors' and dentists' receptionists/ secretaries. At least one Archbishop's secretary came through her agency.

It was the death of her sister, Evelyn, in 1985 which brought about another turn in Sylvia Curley's life.

"The lease of Mugga Mugga had been passed on from father to mother to Evelyn. In her will she had requested that Ada and I continue the lease. I was to be responsible for everything and the farm and cottage was to be for education purposes."

There were many obstacles to be overcome in achieving this. Condolence speeches in the ACT Legislative Assembly following her death are replete with ministers describing their being summoned to her home in Manuka, being treated to a pleasant morning or afternoon tea and then being seriously lobbied by this formidable lady to have her plans for Mugga Mugga to become an environmental education centre for Canberra's future generations.

Her plaque on the ACT Honour Walk records the reward of her persistence.

"In 1994, Sylvia donated the family's original home to the people of the ACT. In doing so, she established the Mugga Mugga Memorial Education Centre for a museum and for environmental studies. The facility is administered by the ACT Government."

Sylvia Curley was a devout Catholic, very much at home in St Christopher's Cathedral and someone who lived out Jesus' great commandment: "Love one another as I have loved you."

● Tell us about your memories of the Canberra legends in this series. Write to *Catholic Voice*, GPO Box 3089 Canberra 2601, or e-mail ed.voice@cg.catholic.org.au

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