

a centenary of canberra's catholics

A formidable lady of simple goodness

In the 18th in a series of portraits of significant Catholics of the national capital, Bishop Pat Power pays tribute to Kingston Guest House manager Edith Dickinson

A significant part of Canberra's social history is the Kingston Guest House which was bounded by Kennedy, Eyre and Leichhardt streets and was originally built in 1926 as the Printers' Quarters and provided family accommodation. When it became the Kingston Guest House it catered for single men who in the main worked at the Government Printing Office or the Post Office.

When I came to St Christopher's Parish as a newly ordained priest in 1966, Kingston was part of my beat, and at that time Edith Dickinson was well established as manager of the guest house which by then was open to male boarders irrespective of where they worked. I had an earlier indirect connection with Edith whose daughter, Dell, was a classmate at St Christopher's School throughout our primary schooling. Dell was the youngest of 13 children.

Edith Dickinson was a formidable lady, no stranger to hard work. She had come to Canberra with her husband Stan in the 1920s. Like so many of their contemporaries, they began their life in the national capital in Causeway.

As their family grew, the Dickinsons moved to their own home in Dawes Street, Kingston, opposite Kingston Oval, home of the Eastlake (Aussie Rules) Football Club. Several of the Dickinson boys played for Eastlake, and Edith and Stan were strong supporters of the club.

Frank Boyle has fond memories of his three-year stint at the Kingston Guest House in the late 1940s. "Edith Dickinson helped at the Kingston Guest House from at least 1944 when it was managed by Neil Hussey and Les (Bluey) Lane until 1948 with Mr and Mrs Don Kennett managing 1948-49.

"Mrs Dickinson took over in her own right from 1949 until the late 1960s. Mrs Dickinson kept a motherly eye on the younger guests and tended to them when they were ill. She often packed them a special lunch, for example, ham, instead of basic sandwich fillings which was very much appreciated.

"Mrs Dickinson supervised the serving of meals, with guests lining up outside the kitchen. To my knowledge, she never missed a meal – breakfast, lunch or dinner. Shift workers were especially catered for with meals put aside for them.

"Mrs Dickinson was helped in serving meals and in servicing the rooms by two of her daughters, Betty and Dell, and youngest son, Don, who often took meals with the guests."

Dell remembers her mother working long hours, commencing at 5am with the lighting of the wood stoves and ending about 8pm with the washing up. Dell, too, attests to her mother's kindness to her boarders.

One of her guests couldn't pay his week's board so she accepted his offer of a painting he had done of the historic St John's Church in Reid. Dell still has it in her possession. Another guest on one occasion offered in lieu of board a tray he had made.

When I decided to include Edith Dickinson in this series of "Canberra's Catholics", I told Dell that her mother would be the only one in the series who was a non-practising Catholic. Dell corrected me: "She was non-churchgoing Catholic, but she practised her faith in the charity which was so important in her life."

Working long hours, seven days a week made it difficult for Edith to get to Mass and it was not helped by the fact that husband Stan was not well disposed to the Catholic Church.

Dell is grateful to their next door neighbour in Dawes Street, Mrs Stella Somes, for enabling her mother and herself to maintain some tenuous links with the Catholic Church and for the fact that she was a mother figure to her in her own mother's absence.

Dell recalls Edith occasionally giving Stella money to put on the plate for her at St Christopher's. Stella's younger son, Michael, a future Canberra magistrate, was also a classmate at St Christopher's throughout primary school.

Michael Somes remembers Edith Dickinson as a hard-working and extremely charitable woman. One of Michael's vivid memories is that "she would deliver to us from time to time a large tin of pure white dripping, which I must say was very tasty spread on toast with salt and pepper."

The Dickinsons never owned a car and were never flush with money. On a good week when all the bills were paid at the guest house, Edith and Stan would celebrate with a meal at Happy's Chinese restaurant in Queanbeyan, there being no Chinese restaurant in Canberra at the time. Without a car, they would need



Edith (far right) with daughter Dell, son-in-law John Hartley nursing Peter, with Paula on her first Communion day and Laura.



LEFT: Stan and Edith Dickinson on their wedding day.

BELOW: Edith with daughter-in-law Ella and Irene, one of 58 grandchildren.

to organise a lift home after catching the bus into Queanbeyan.

Born in 1900, Edith was still living in her home in Dawes St, Kingston, when she died in 1974. She was diagnosed with cancer in 1972 and given only three months to live. However, her twin grandchildren, Nadine and Scott, were born in that year and Edith announced her determination to live to see them walk.

As Canberra prepares to celebrate its centenary, Edith Dickinson's strong work ethic, her great kindness and charity and her down-to-earth simple goodness are examples of some of the sterling qualities that have given our city its unique character.

