A favourite son remembered for his kindness

In the 15th in a series of portraits of significant Catholics of the national capital, Bishop Pat Power tells of the contribution of Gerry Kilmartin, a pioneer mover and shaker with sterling qualities.

Gerald Joseph Kilmartin hailed from Sydney where he was born at the beginning of the 20th century, but he will be long remembered as a favourite son of Canberra. He had qualified as a fitter and turner when he arrived in Canberra in 1925. He returned to Sydney to marry Maud Elizabeth Kelly on 13 February, 1926 after which Canberra was to become their family home town.

Like so many newcomers to Canberra, Gerry Kilmartin was in for a shock. Son John describes those beginnings: “My father told me that on his initial arrival, he was met at Queanbeyan by Maud and his father, John Kilmartin and Maud’s sister, Bessie who went on to become an astute business woman. My father later moved to Causeway which was the starting point for many of the national capital’s pioneer families. So it is not surprising that Gerry and Maud’s side of the family had a strong interest in horse racing on both sides. Terry Simonds, did the rounds of Causeway, locating those in need and distributing what Fr Haydon had gathered.”

John Kilmartin reports that his mother, Maud, attended as a guest the opening of the first Parliament House in 1927 and in 1968 at the invitation of Prime Minister Bob Hawke she was the current seat of Government.

Gerry could not attend the 1927 ceremony because he was busy working that day helping to put in the place the domed roof, which he had helped to build, for the Mt Stromlo Observatory.

There was a long-standing interest in horse racing on both Gerry and Maud’s side of the family, so it is not surprising that Gerry was part of the formation of St Patrick’s Racing Club at Tuggeranong on the McCormack family property. Daughter, Anna Vincent, tells how her father was approached by Mr Sim Bennett to instigate what was to become the ACT Jockey Club.

“Dad did the background work and paperwork, after visiting the AJC in Sydney to establish the club and allow it to race under the auspices of the AJC.

“Our mother was the de facto secretary prior to the appointment of Mr George O’Neill who was the front man.”

In typical fashion, Gerry then stepped back and assumed a simple membership role.

People who knew Gerry Kilmartin remember him as a man of great kindness.

When he found out that the Good Samaritan Sisters were being subjected to the extremes of Canberra’s winter he took steps to provide heating for the convent with the help of his plumber brother-in-law Jack Kelly.

Once the Kilmartins moved to their property at Mugga Mugga, they provided produce for the Sisters. One of their daughters, Loretta, would become a Sister of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart after attending St Christopher’s School along with her five sisters and brother, John.

When the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary arrived in Canberra in the 1960s to establish Marymead, Gerry and Maud Kilmartin were on hand again to help the Sisters and the vulnerable children they were caring for.

Anna Vincent speaks of her father sending weekly meat from the abattoir to the convent and the butcher delivering boxes of fruit and vegetables.

After Gerry’s death in 1970, Maud continued to be involved with the Marymead auxiliary and for many years helped count the money raised from the walkathon.

During my seminary holidays in the 1960s, I did some work with Jim O’Malley, manager of Thomas W Green’s Wool and Skin buyers. Part of my work with Jim’s son, James, took us to the Canberra Abattoirs then owned by Gerry and John Kilmartin.

There could not be a better summary of a great life than that provided by John Kilmartin: “Gerry Kilmartin was a pioneer of the new city of Canberra, being involved in its early construction and in community and church activities. He was a lecturer and instructor at Canberra Technical College especially teaching computer science.


He was a great character, absorbing raconteur, generous to all, and in his commercial career, a mover and shaker despite being always short of resources. He is remembered with much affection.”