

BENDIGO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

AMY HUXTABLE MEMORIAL LECTURE, DUDLEY HOUSE, 60 VIEW STREET

BENDIGO - Sunday 18th January 1987

SPEAKER: MRS KITTY ROSE - "MIRRIDONG"

Madame Chairwoman, Members of the Bendigo Historical Society,
Ladies and Gentlemen.

For me to be invited to deliver this the 7th Amy Huxtable Memorial
Lecture is indeed a great honour.

Amy's professional role at the Bendigo Advertiser extended far
beyond that of the traditional women's editor of a provincial
newspaper. Her compassionate and commonsense reporting of
community events and issues ensured that the people of Bendigo
were informed and enthused by her articles.

The title of my address is the History of Mirridong Home and
Day Centre for the Blind - a topic I find particularly appropriate
as Amy Huxtable was a valued and loyal supporter of Mirridong.

In recognition of her services given unstintedly she was awarded
a Life Governorship by the Association for the Blind - the
highest honour the Association can confer.

I was privileged to count Amy among my closest personal friends
and to have shared in the dedication and encouragement she
engendered, not only at Mirridong but in every organization
throughout this Community.

Mirridong Home and Day Centre for the Blind is the Bendigo Branch of the Association for the Blind, whose headquarters are situated at Brighton Beach, Victoria. The Association is a voluntary organization caring for the Blind and the visually impaired people of Victoria. The Association co-operates with all Blind Welfare Agencies but is an entirely separate and independent body.

The Association is notable for two reasons: firstly it was the first organization to care for persons who became blind in adulthood and secondly it was formed by the blind for the Blind.

Until the year 1895 the Blind Institute and Asylum, known today as the Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind on St Kilda Road, Melbourne, was the only blind welfare agency in Victoria.

It provided education for blind children and later employed them in sheltered workshops.

For the adult blind and those who lost their sight after school leaving age there was no employment or education available. The blind were rejected by the community and considered to be inferior beings. They were classed prohibitive immigrants and were compelled to pay a bond of £400 to the government before travelling interstate. No pension was available.

Those who were employed in the Institute's factory fared little better, as the majority of the workers lived-in at the Institute and were seldom given an opportunity of integrating into the sighted community. Few braille books were available - regretfully few were capable of reading those offering.

A group of young students, who attended the Institute school, were concerned about their less fortunate friends - some they had not heard of since leaving the school while others known

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to them were forced to beg to survive. Like the young of today this group decided to become involved in a bit of stirring to bring the plight of the blind before the public. They were anxious to give assistance to the adult and isolated blind, to control their own destinies, to ensure that the Blind were accepted into the community as normal people, and to generally raise the status of the blind throughout the state.

The motivating force behind this group was a 22 year old girl named Tilly Aston, born at Carisbrook of English parents and blind since childhood. She graduated from the Institute school and was at this time doing an Arts Course at the University of Melbourne and teaching music and singing at her home at South Yarra. She was also a poet and authoress and in 1894 was instrumental in establishing the Braille Library.

Tilly Aston, with the assurance of support from her friends decided to call a meeting of the Blind to form an organization to do something about their grievances. At this meeting held on the 8th December, 1895, the Association for the Advancement of the Blind, known today as the Association for the Blind, was formed with a membership of eight blind persons, Tilly Aston as its leader and a capital of 8/-.

Membership in the Association increased and the next few years saw vigorous growth, much action and great achievements.

Enlisting the aid of prominent business men and politicians and exerting pressure by various methods, problems were being solved and harsh laws amended. The blind gained status and respect in the eyes of the community - in 1902 free postage was granted on Braille literature - by 1909 the bond system

of travel had been amended and blind citizens were given a vote by both the Federal and State governments.

In 1911 pensions were granted to all blind persons over 16 years of age.

For 49 years the Association was controlled solely by the Blind and the many benefits and privileges won during those years are being enjoyed by the Blind throughout Australia today.

As the Association grew and the spending of publicly subscribed money increased, sighted friends exercised increasing influence in the administration. This was recognised in the acceptance of a new Constitution when the Association was incorporated under the Hospitals and Charities Act in 1944 with a committee of 7 Blind and 8 sighted people.

Until her death in 1947, Tilly Aston continued to be the leader and Guiding Light of the Association.

While the early work of the Association was concentrated in the Melbourne area, Committee members were conscious of the need to assist the Blind in country districts.

By 1918, the Association had appointed a blind visitor, Miss Alice Ackland, to work in the Bendigo area. In a short space of time she had located 18 blind persons in Bendigo and 6 in Castlemaine.

Following a meeting called by Councillor D. Andrews at the Bendigo Town Hall, on 20th May, 1925, a Committee was formed from representatives of the district churches to undertake the work of the Association in Bendigo. Mrs M. Madsen was elected president with Mrs M.G. Guidice, Mrs W. Holt and Miss Winnie Hobson as office bearers. Meetings were held in the vestry of the Wesley Church in Forest Street. Miss Hobson held the position of Secretary for thirty three years.

Within a month of its formation the Committee was faced with blind people in need - the first expenditure approved for payment was for groceries and wood totalling one and a half guineas - a sizable sum in those days. By 1927 Miss Ackland was visiting over 30 blind people - many of whom were reputed to be on the verge of destitution.

Following the death of an elderly blind lady living alone, the Committee, shocked and upset by the tragedy, urged the Association to establish a Home for the Blind in Bendigo without delay. With the support of the Association and funds raised by a local appeal, the first Home for adult blind people in country Victoria was opened on the 10th August, 1927, sadly history does record by whom, in Bennett Street, Long Gully, at a cost of £800, catering for six residents in the care of a housekeeper. By 1936 a more spacious brick property was purchased in Inglewood Road.

On the 29th February 1936, the second Bendigo House for the Blind accommodating nine residents was opened by Lt Col Lansell, the then member for Bendigo in the Legislative Council.

This house was suitable for several years, but as the need for residential care increased it too became inadequate.

In 1945 the decision was made by the Bendigo Committee to build a new home. Two acres of land on the McIvor Highway were purchased, this was the first stage of a project which culminated in the building of a home specifically designed to meet the needs of blind people, costing £90,000.

The opening of Mirridong - an aboriginal word meaning Happy Home on November 24th 1957 by the Hon. E.P. Cameron, State Minister for Health at that time, was the result of many years of effort by the Committee and the citizens of Bendigo supported by State and Federal Government funds, a large legacy from Mrs Amy Bayne

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on the 20th September, 1978, by the then President of the Association Mr J.O. Wicking.

During the ensuing years Mirridong concentrated on expanding its welfare services to the blind and visually impaired people of the Lodden Campaspe Region. A major undertaking held by the Welfare Department last year was a Regional Welfare Survey on the utilization of its existing services and the projected needs of the blind throughout the region.

The results of the survey will be ^{the} basis for determining the future developemnt of Mirridong's community services for the visually impaired.

A successful pilot Pyramid of Care Programme, a telephone socialization programme, introduced by the Welfare Officer, Mrs Doris Goddard, in March 1984, allowed isolated visually impaired handicapped people to converse with others in similar circumstances lead to the formation of the Day Centre at Mirridong for visually impaired persons of the Bendigo area and to the a appointment of a full time Activities Co-ordinator. The centre functioning since December 1985 is currently operating on a weekly basis with membership of 36 plus a waiting list. We have been most fortunate to recruit a splendid band of volunteers to assist in manning this project.

The residents are encouraged to join in the Day Centre Programmes and are enjoying the extra social contacts and the variety of activities available, in addition to the recreational and restorative therapy projects they have become accustomed to. A recently introduced and very popular therapy is hydrotherapy. Much pleasure is gained form our latest acquisition - a 12 seater mini-bus, by the residents and Day Centre clients alike.

The work on the current project taking place at Mirridong, the Redevelopment of the Nursing Wing is under way. The first stage, a Day sittingroom for the use of the nursing wing residents, made possible by a generous gift from Mrs E.W. Vicars-Foote, is nearing completion and, hopefully, will be officially opened in the autumn.

Mirridong is administered by a Committee of 10 local citizens. Under the direction of a Manager and a Director of Nursing a highly trained and dedicated staff of 61 persons cares for the 63 residents whose ages vary from 58 years to 102½ years. 38 residents are receiving extensive care. The remainder, in addition to blindness, have a variety of problems to contend with - quite often blindness is the minor handicap. Mirridong is appropriately staffed and equipped to care for residents in need of specific hospital care.

Mirridong liases fully with Homes, Hospitals, and Government Departments to provide work experience for students of local schools and colleges. The Committee encourages continuing Education Programmes for the staff and provides lectures and workshops on visual impairment and related topics for staff, volunteers and professionals of health care agencies.

Six auxiliaries, two of which have already passed the 25 year mark, and the staff Social Club work consistantly and successfully to provide financial support for Mirridong.

1987 marks the 30th anniversary of the opening of Mirridong and the 60th anniversary of the opening of the first Home for the Adult Blind in country Victoria - in the beautiful city of Bendigo.

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Mirridong has come a long way from Bennett Street, Long Gully - one thing that has remained is the interest, the generosity and the involvement of the Bendigo Community - something for which we are ever grateful and would not survive without.

Ladies and Gentlemen that is Mirridong's history to this date - what the future holds for homes such as Mirridong who knows! Please God may Mirridong be always blessed with supporters of the the calibre of Amy Huxtable.