

Dorothy Nuskie notes

Subjects:

Rainbow (place)
Boarding from age 6
Older girls looking after younger ones
6.30am rising, 7.30am breakfast
Duties (housework)
Pianos
Nursery
Guy Fawkes Night
School
Rug Making
Discipline
Knitting
Music-piano lessons
Polio epidemic of 1937
Catholics—quarantine
Batchelor of Music
Playing for audiences
Education-Hedger
Conservatorium
Hassetts College, Chapel St Prahran
Hostel-Raleigh st
Olinda
Pension-student allowance
Giving music lessons-St Mathews church hall
Corowa school
Friday Program (Burwood) 1998

People:

Miss Palmer
Miss Holden
Mr Kelton
Margaret Serie
Ruby Hooper
Mr Hedger
Miss Dunkerton
Miss Bryan
Mr Findlayson
Mr Dent
Mr Sutcliffe
Mr Palmer
Hugh (Jeffries?)
Harry Andrews
Sir Bernard Heinz
Neil Westh
Ada Sharp
Matron Morrison
Mr Cowey
Barbara (student)
Carlotta (student)
Mrs Watsford
Miss Corr
Mr Bunn
Arthur McKay
Marg Fairly
Gwenda Woolridge
Peter Evans
Miss Rogers
Ethel Carr
Miss Gerber

Dorothy Hamilton (nee Nuske)

Questioner: Alan Nuske

Date: 27th November 1990

I came to the RVIB in 1932, at the age of 6. I had come from Rainbow, which was some 260 miles from Melbourne. As a little girl, I was a boarder from the beginning of the year (from February), up until December. During that time, I never really saw my parents because it was so far for them to have to travel, that it was not worth them coming down to get me for holidays (we only had one week of school holidays in May and in September). During my holidays, I usually went to friends of the family who lived, either, in Melbourne or just out of Melbourne, or to another girl's place. But, the weekends were spent at school. It was really quite interesting, I think, being a boarder (a full boarder); the other girls became more like your own sisters, and you got to know them extremely well. Being a boarder, on the girls' side, we had to get up at 6:30 every morning and an older girl was responsible for looking after us smaller girls. She would help her (the smaller girl) to dress herself, teach her to strip her bed and make her bed, and do all those things. We did a lot of duties at that time; for example, one girl would have to go down at 7 o'clock and help to put the breakfast down, ready for 7:30; after breakfast, 2 girls would wash and dry the dishes, and at lunchtime, at 12 o'clock, another girl would have to set the table; after dinner (or the midday meal), 2 girls would do the dishes again; at quarter to 5, a girl would go up to set the tables and put the food around for tea; after tea, 3 girls would be on duty, 2 to wash and dry the dishes and the other to set the table for breakfast. These duties would always rotate. I feel that was really very good training for us (although we probably didn't think so, at the time). Those times were pretty strict; we were really well disciplined. In one way, for example, with our piano practice, there were always pianos going in when I was a boarder; there was, something like, 16 pianos in that building, and everybody had a practice time; if your practice time was 8 o'clock, you went ... there was no argument about whether you went for your practice or not, it was just time to go; I think that was really very good disciplining and very good training for all of us.

We had 2 ladies who looked after the girls; I think there were probably – just at a rough guess – approximately 25 girls boarding there, and we had 2 ladies – Miss. Palmer and Miss. Holden – who looked after us. They weren't really supervising us in the playground, they weren't down there, we seemed to look after ourselves and play around. Miss. Holden had Thursday afternoons off, and Miss. Palmer had Wednesday afternoons off; they alternated with their weekends off. There was also 2 domestic staff who helped in the dining rooms, and seemed to do the cleaning around the girls' side. There was also 1 man – Mr. Kelton(?) – who looked after the boys. That was a very small staff for all those children – 25 girls and, probably, a similar number of boys. Miss. Palmer and Miss. Holden were 2 entirely different people. Miss. Palmer was a very gentle lady, a very kindly lady, and I think most of the girls found her that way (as far as I know). But Miss. Holden was a very stern, strict lady that we were very scared of. I always remember that if the girls came down the grounds and said, "Dorothy, Miss. Holden wants you", I would always say, "Did she say 'Dorothy' or 'Dorothy Nuske'?" ; if it was 'Dorothy', it meant that she was going to read you a letter, but if it was 'Dorothy Nuske', then there was trouble. We were all really quite frightened of her (Miss. Holden); she had walk that belonged just to Miss Holden; I can hear it now, actually. I had one experience with her that I still remember very

clearly: when I was about 10 and I was doing my piano exam, I had to stay in for the holidays and I was down at the nursery. One of the maids – who looked after the children while the nurses were at their dinner – would have to see to it that the little ones went to sleep; I remember her smacking Margaret Serie(?), I remember that very clearly, and after the holidays I told the girls – one day when we were cleaning our shoes – that Ruby had Margaret Serie. Well, what happened from then: Ruby came and said that she did not do that, and I insisted she did, so she took me to Miss. Holden and told her what I had said; Miss. Holden tried, desperately, to get me to say that it was a lie and that she (Ruby) hadn't done that; she smacked me around the legs and smacked me around the hands, and said: "come back after school"; I came back after school and she asked me again, and I said, "yes", and she said, "go to bed after tea, until I tell you that you can stay up". Now, 'after tea' was quarter to 6, so for 1 whole month I went to bed straight after tea. At the end of that month, it happened to be Guy Fawkes evening, and I thought, "oh, I've got to go to bed, and all the other girls are going to enjoy the crackers", so I said to the girls, "don't take the quilts off, I'll take them off tonight" (that was somebody's job too – to take off all those quilts); I thought that if I took them off very, very slowly, she might eventually come up and say that I could stay up; and that's what happened – all of a sudden, I heard these footsteps come up the stairs, and she came in and she said, "Now, Dorothy Nuske, did Ruby Hooper hit Margaret Serie?", and I said, "yes Miss. Holden"; she said, "she did not", and I said, "yes". She said, "Do you wish me to take you to Mr. Hedger?", and I said, "No, Miss. Holden", and then she said, "Then she didn't hit her", and I said, "Yes she did"; she said, "Go downstairs and don't let me hear another word from you", and that was it, and that was the end of that. So, that's the way I found Miss. Holden: very, very strict. But I must admit that some years after I left school, I met her again and I really didn't recognise her – she had to tell me who she was, and she was so gentle; so there was obviously another side to her that I never, ever saw.

My memories of school were: the school bell ringing at 9 o'clock, and we'd all go into the boys' yard to line up in twos (I don't know where the boys lined up, actually), and Miss. Dunkerton or Miss. Bryan would come out and march us into school. We all had to stand in front of the particular door of the grade that we were in, and then Mr. Findlayson or Mr. Dent, would call the roll. We all had to stand in attention and stand at ease, and our names were all called. That stands in my mind very clearly. With Mrs. Dunkerton – who taught grades 3 and 4 – also taught us rug making (woollen mats) and knitting, and nothing should ever stand in the way of knitting and rug making; she used to get us to come back at lunchtime and write out these patterns (2 blue, 3 red, 5 yellow, or whatever it was), and I was always wanting to go and do my practice or have a music lesson; she was never very happy about that, and I always remember her saying to me that I had a pale-white, measly little face, and that it was no wonder I had that, because I was always sitting over the piano. Music played a very large part in our education; when I think about it, we had singing classes – we had 2 singing lessons a week – we had 2 piano lessons per week, those who learnt organ had 2 organ lessons a week, we had a theory lesson a week, a Braille music lesson a week, and 2 music appreciation lessons a week; I think we were really extremely fortunate with all the music we had (perhaps I'm a bit biased, being a musician, myself). I started to learn – and I think we all did, everybody – the piano; I hardly know of anybody who didn't. We seemed to start with Mr. Sutcliffe, and then – if you showed any great promise, you didn't last with him very long – you'd be sent off to Mr. Palmer. I remember I had a couple of lessons with him, and I remember the

day he said, "I think you'll have to go off to Mr. Palmer", so that was the end of my lessons with Fred Sutcliffe.

Alan: Do you have any memories of Fred Sutcliffe?

I remember him as having a lovely tenor voice, I remember his singing; that was my greatest memory of Mr. Sutcliffe. I really didn't learn from him for very long, so my memory of him, in teaching, was very limited. Of course, I had Mr. Palmer and I really can't speak more highly of him; he was such a dedicated teacher, and he just gave everything of himself to his students. I never, ever remember him being cross (with me, anyway). He was just such a wonderful man ... the work that he did; he was just tireless. I remember when I had come back from the university, I'd come and say, "Mr. Palmer, I have to learn this" or "I have to learn that", and he'd go dotting on his frame and dot out all these Mozart sonatas or Chopin waltzes, or whatever I had to learn; he'd peer over his music with his magnifying glass. He seemed to be there before school, and early after lunch, and late in the afternoon; he didn't spare himself one minute. My memories of him are really excellent, and the same of Hugh – who taught me theory – and also George Findlay who taught me the organ. I originally learned the organ from Harry Andrews; we were supposed to have a half-hour lesson, and he'd arrive 3 minutes before I was ready to go back to school, so I don't know quite how much I learned from him; but eventually, I started learning from George, which was really excellent.

Another part of my schooling was during the polio epidemic, which was in 1937. We were in quarantine, and that epidemic went from about June until March/April of the next year. So, we were in quarantine from June till December, and we weren't allowed out ... if you were in the school, you were not allowed out, and nobody was allowed in. The only people that were allowed out were the Catholics; they were allowed to go to mass, but the Protestants weren't allowed to go to church. We had a lot of fun during those times; we played, and we got up to a lot of mischief because we weren't allowed out of the whole place but, nevertheless, it certainly drew us all closer together. When we went home at Christmastime, we were allowed to go (those of us who lived in the country), but we were told that the car wasn't to stop in the city (we had to go right through), and when we came back again, we were in quarantine again, until April (I think it was); the restrictions were slightly lifted, in that we could have visitors, but they had to speak to us over the hedge, or you could stand in the sitting room and your visitors could stand outside the window.

Now, Mr. Hedger was very interested in promoting the work of the children of the institute, and I think music was one way in which he could promote the work of the institute very much. So, if you were musically inclined, he made great use of you; it was to my benefit that he made use of me. When visitors came, we were always called out of school, and we had to play to the visitors; well, he didn't realize, but that was excellent experience for a musician (to have to play to an audience). Somehow or other, he got it into his head that I would be the first blind girl, in the southern hemisphere, to obtain my Bachelor of Music. It wouldn't have been too bad if I had had those aspirations too but anyway, he planted them there.

When I did – what was then – grade 2 at the age of 14, I topped the state (tied with a sighted girl) for the highest marks in that particular grade, and I remember Mr. Palmer

reading me my report, which was a very good one, from Sir Bernard Heinz; at the end of it – when he finished reading it – he said, “oh, this is just what we want ... oh, I’ll show this to the chief”, so he went off to the chief and showed him the report; of course, what Mr. Palmer wanted was for the institute to send me to Mr. Waldemar Seidel, to have lessons, prior to going to the conservatorium. Of course, Mr. Hedger said, “yes, of course she can”. Sir Bernard said, on my report, that I must be encouraged in further musical studies so, from there, I went to Mr. Seidel for 2 years ... it was probably more than that ... probably 3 or 4 years, before I started my course. That, of course, meant that I needed to have secondary education and if you had some very good reason for needing secondary education, Mr. Hedger really saw to it that you got that education. So, for 1 year, I had to be coached by Neil Westh so he could get me up to the standard to go to Hassetts College, which was a commercial college in Chapel St., Prahran that had a small academic section to it. Any blind student who went to secondary education, in those days, seemed to go to Hassetts. So, I went to Hassetts and did my Intermediate, Leaving, and Matriculation. When I went to Hassetts, we didn’t have any support from anybody, really; we had Ada Sharp (who transcribed our books into Braille, if we needed them done), and that was about all. For any help that we may need, in any subject at all, we would just go to Neil and ask him for help; but there was nothing really organised.

Alan: Did you get a living allowance?

No. Well, that was a very interesting one. I went to the hostel at the age of 15, and that was because I was doing my Intermediate and I had to go there then, because it was 1942 when the school was evacuated to Olinda. If there hadn’t have been an evacuation to Olinda, I would’ve stayed at the institute but because they went to Olinda, I had to go to the hostel and from there, I went to school (Hassetts). I remember, very clearly, Matron Morrison speaking to me on the night before the girls went off to Olinda and I went to the hostel. I walked out of the institute, and I knew nothing; I didn’t know how to get from A to B, or C to D. I remember my very first walk on my own; I was coming back from Hassetts on a tram; incidentally, Mr. Cowey used to come and get Barbara, Carlotta, and myself from the hostel and take us to Hassetts, and then pick us up and take us home again, but this was the first time that I had to do something a little bit different; I got off at St. Kilda Rd. and had to go down to the institute, and I had to walk along St. Kilda Rd.; it was a very frightening experience, at 15 ½ (never having walked down the street on your own, and having to do that).

At the hostel, the people who showed us how to get around the streets and find the shops, were the other blind girls at that hostel; they were the ones who showed us. At the girls’ hostel, which was in Raleigh St. (there were 2 – a girls’ and a boys’, and the girls’ one was nearest to Punt Rd.), we had 1 lady to look after us – originally a Mrs. Watsford, and then Miss. Corr – and she cooked our meals and did the housework, but we did all the washing, and things like that. I remember, initially, I paid no board because I had nothing to pay it with. I got a pension at the age of 16; it was a very small pension in those days, and that’s all I had; I really can’t remember how much it was, but I did have to pay some board out of that, so I had very little after that. I had no student allowance at all and, one day, I discovered – and I can’t remember how I discovered it, or who told me – that the boys were all getting student allowances; I thought, “I’m not going to put up with this ... I shall go down and ask why I’m not getting an allowance”, so I went down to the office and I asked – I’m not whether it

was Mr. Bunn or Mr. Hedger at that time (it must've been Hedger) – and it was decided, in the end, that instead of giving me a student allowance, I need not pay any hostel board; that was in the last year of my course, so it wasn't very long to go.

The days of the hostel ... we were quite free to move as we liked; the only restriction was that until you were 21, you were supposed to tell the housekeeper where you were going if you were going out at night, and what time you were expected to be home ... they were the only restrictions that were placed on us. From the age of 15 ½, it was pretty easy.

Eventually, to Mr. Hedger's great delight, I became the first blind girl in the southern hemisphere to obtain the degree of Bachelor of Music. I remember very clearly – just before the year ended – I was in the schoolrooms, and the telephone rang for me; I went to the telephone, and Mr. Hedger said to me, "Dorothy, I've got a little idea and I'd like you to carry it out for me", and I said, "Yes, Mr. Hedger", and he said, "I would like to provide free music lessons to the children, of any blind employee or blind person, and I would like you to be the teacher of those children"; I thought, "This is wonderful ... poor children but nevertheless, this is wonderful ... to have this opportunity" because I realized it would give me more experience, which I really wanted; the thing I really wanted to do was to teach sighted children in a normal school, but I thought – in the end – this would certainly give me experience. So what happened was that next year, they hired the kindergarten St. Matthews Church Hall, and all these readymade students came to me from all over Melbourne; when I think of it, they came from Footscray, Balwyn, Coburg, ... you name it and that's where they came from – all over the place. I taught them either early in the morning before school, after school, or Saturdays. I remember going up to 3:30 on a Saturday afternoon, and I worked very, very hard for very little money; whatever money I ever got, I thought was wonderful, and it probably was good pay at that time, anyway. Through that, I built up quite a little teaching practice. I taught from 1950 till 1953 when I obtained a position in the school in Melbourne (Corowa), and then I took just a few (students). Then, that system was continued by my brother Alan Nuske, and also by Arthur McKay; I'm not quite sure when it actually faded out, but perhaps other people would know when that did finish. From a graduate's point of view, it was excellent, and I really have Mr. Hedger to thank so much for that.

Now, George Findlay was the person responsible for putting all the music into Braille, and for 40 years he did that very faithfully with the assistance of many readers – in particular, Marg Fairly(?). Marg and George worked very closely as an excellent team. I remember George saying to me – during the 1970s – "You know, I can't go on doing this forever; we must think of somebody else who can take over from me when I'm not going to do it any longer ... but remember, I'm not thinking of giving up yet. I think you and Gwenda (Gwenda Woolridge(?)) would make an ideal team". Gwenda was a girl who I had taught at Corowa when I was teaching there and we became very good friends. So I said to George, "I can't even use a Perkins", and he said, "I'll come around and I'll show you"; he showed me the Perkins, he showed me how to use it, and he said, "Use it – don't write on your frame – anything you have to write, write on the Perkins"; of course, I didn't use it all.

In 1976 – one night – the telephone rang and it was Marg, and she said to me, "George is ill in hospital and we're in the midst of some very important work ... could you do it?". My heart sank; I'd forgotten how to put the paper in, so I rang Hilda Gammon and I said, "Hilda, I've got to do this music on the Perkins and I can't even

remember how to put the paper in". So she explained how to put the paper in, and I practiced diligently, that night, at putting the paper in. The next day Marg came, and I'll never forget the first page of music that I ever wrote; it took me an hour to write one page, because I was so unused to reversing my letters, and to do any setting out of piano music was just horrific. Anyway, we got through it. I did a little of it then – on and off – during George's illness. Eventually, Gwenda and I took it over completely; nothing was being done to organise us into doing it. I remember we had a meeting of musicians in my home, and George would try to encourage them to do something about it i.e. having us trained; we were holding meetings, and nothing was really happening so George said, "Right! We're going to start, I'm going to train Dorothy and Gwenda, and at the end of the 10 week training period, we'll send them the bill". So that's exactly what he did, and that's how we started. We started writing on the 8th of August 1977, and have been doing it ever since.

Alan: That must've been very close to when George died.

It was. He died on the 7th of September that very year, so really, we were only doing it for about a month before he died; it was really high time for us to be trained; we really could've done with more training but, we got through.

Since then, the Braille music transcribing has increased, and we do a lot of music transcribing these days – every day of the week for perhaps 16-odd hours per week. The Braille of music is done for the children in the integrated system, as well as any other child who needs their music, as well as adults who need music for their tertiary courses or any professional blind musician, or anybody else who needs it for pure entertainment.

Alan: It was through that, that you got involved in the Friday program.

Yes, that's right. Then, Peter Evans said to me – at around the end of 1988 – "We'd like to have you on site"; up until then, I had been working in my own home, which was very satisfactory because Gwenda lives near to me. So, he said it would be good to have us on site at least for 1 day, so that people would know that we were around and music was around, and so forth, so we came to Burwood, and we spent every Friday there. It was decided that the children who came in on the Friday program ... we suggested that they really should be learning their Braille music, because that was one skill that they were really missing out on in the integrated system; for the Friday program, I was allocated to have all those children – whether they learn an instrument or not, doesn't really matter, the important thing is that they learn their music so that they can then apply it to their singing (that they may do at school), or the choirs (that they may have joined in their out of school activities), and they're also able to participate in their class music work, as well. They come about twice a term (approximately), perhaps 3 to 4 to 5 children a week; what it means is that I only see each child about once a month; it's not a lot, but at least it does give them a feeling of it, and the children – who are really keen and who have plenty of support from home – really do benefit from that, and I can quote, for example, one little girl whom I've had for the Friday program for music (I had her a couple of years before the program really got launched properly); she was able – through that system, and seeing her once a month – to get up to 5th grade theory, which was really excellent, and also, to be able to work out and learn all her music up to 6th and 7th grade standard from Braille.

One of the highlights of the week, for all of us girls, was a Monday night when Miss. Rogers would come to read to us; such a wonderful lady she was. I'm not exactly sure of when she first came, but it was in the 1920s (perhaps 1928 or 1929) when she came to read to us, with her friend Ethel Carr (who came to read for the boys). You had to be 13 before you could stay up and listen to Miss. Rogers; until you were 13, you went to bed at 7 o'clock, and from 13 onwards you went to bed at 9 o'clock. Miss. Rogers would come to read to us, and she would all of our favourite books e.g. Anne of Green Gables, The Rosary, ... all sorts of books she read to us. In the summer, she would bring lollies for us to eat; in the winter she would bring bread and butter, and we'd make toast at the open fire – what a thrill that was, that was a real treat – we never, never saw toast when I was at school, so we really enjoyed that ... sometimes she'd bring crumpets. Then, at the end of the year, she would give us a wonderful party; we'd go to her home and she'd give us this Christmas party. Those 2 ladies read to the children from the late 1920s until the time when the children went out to Burwood, so it was a good 40 years that they read week after week; they rarely ever missed reading – I think the only times they ever did, they found a substitute; they were the real highlights of our lives. There were 2 other ladies who used to come and read to us, and they were: Miss. Gerber (who came to the girls once a month on a Sunday, and she was a real gem of a lady), and Mrs. Bottle (who came, I think, Tuesdays or Wednesdays, and she used to come and read to us too). But we were really extremely fond of Miss. Rogers, and also dear Miss. Gerber. Miss. Gerber used to come from Essendon, and I know that there were times when she came, and we'd been taken out; she came all that way on the tram, and nobody had told her that we weren't going to be there.

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