

THE LIFE AND WORK OF TILLY THOMPSON

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It has been a pleasure for me to research the life and work of Tilly Thompson. So many of you know something of her, probably some of you know a lot about her.

So to start at the very beginning, everybody has to be born into this world. Tilly Thompson was born Matilda L. Clennell, on the 28th April, 1871. She was the fifth child of John and Matilda Clennell of Wendouree. Her parents had migrated to Victoria in the 1850's; John Clennell came from Durham, England, and Matilda McIntosh from Fifeshire, Scotland. They were married in December, 1862, about twelve years after they had arrived in Australia.

Tilly left school about 1884, aged 13 years and first started work at Davies the Draper; I don't know whether that would be Harry Davies & Co. of later years or not, but Jack Chisholm would probably know, and later moved to Tyler's Drapery in Bridge Street, as a buyer until 1905.

Part of my research has been from a book known as "The Golden Thread^s", which is the story of the beginning of the life of Lucas & Co., the well known local textile company. I think it was at the suggestion of Jessie Scott, that I obtain a copy of that book from the Art Gallery, which I did, and I made certain extracts from that which I will read and also parts of the Saturday Magazine of the Courier on 25th February 1984, when the Courier was supplied with quite a lot of information about Tilly Thompson by Miss Jean Elford, who was an employee in the despatch department of Lucas' for some 28 years. I will later hand that around to you because that article has a series of historical pictures around it regarding the life and work of Tilly Thompson.

The Courier, Saturday Magazine article also deals with the early life of E. Lucas & Co. from which I will now quote: -

"The role of women in the story of Lucas is extraordinary, for times when women generally lacked opportunity to show their business acumen. The business was founded by a woman, Mrs E. Lucas, born Eleanor Hargreaves in Bradford, in 1848. When she was only seven her mother died and her father was forced to place her with sympathetic friends. After two years schooling she began work (how incredible, two years schooling) - (and we don't know at what age that was). At 18 she married John Price, a gold prospector, who was killed in 1878 - the year in which their son Edward Hargreaves Price was born. Widowed and penniless at the age of 30, Mrs Price acquired a sewing machine (I believe it was a second-hand sewing machine) and began to provide for her four young children in a small cottage in James Street (perhaps some of you know James Street runs off Grant street and is the second street over the bridge across Yarrowee Creek). In 1886 eight years later, she married William Lucas of Sebastopol, (hence the name Lucas which stays) but two years later through a mining accident she was widowed again. (the things that happened to the early pioneers - through a mining accident)."

SHE CAME TO BALLARAT IN THE GOLD-RUSH DAYS BEFORE EUREKA

RETYPE

“With the help of her three daughters, she built up a prosperous sewing business in “Whitework” (children’s and ladies underwear was known as Whitework in those days) and had twenty girls employed. (Presumed just in the home in James Street).”

“In 1896, Mr. Edward H. Price (the son born at the time his father John Price was killed) left a career in cabinet making to take over the management of the firm, he was then aged 18 years.”

(Incidentally, I’ll mention now Mrs. Lucas’ business was known as the “Busy Bee”, a good name for that organisation created by a woman”.)

In 1903 they moved to larger premises in Armstrong Street and had the first electric motor installed in Ballarat.

This is reading now from “The Golden Threads”:-

“Among the most colourful personalities on the Lucas customer list was Miss M.L. Clennell, buyer for Tyler’s Drapery in Bridge Street, Ballarat, a woman of boundless enthusiasms (and I love this) and terrifying energy (isn’t it beautiful! This was not written by Mr. Price but for the firm by a woman friend). She had formed a firm friendship with Mrs. Eleanor Lucas at a time when the “Busy Bee” was making up Tyler’s materials, and Mr. Price realised this female dynamo was just the asset he needed in the merchandising side of a business growing too big for one person to handle.

“It was in the early 1900’s that Mr Price’s three sisters had left the firm when they married. (Remember there was one son and three daughters all helping their mother), and Mrs. Lucas herself approaching 60 years of age, at that time preferred to hand over the administrative reins increasingly as she saw how capably her son was carrying on the business. When the firm moved to Armstrong Street, Mr Price was faced with a problem in executive staffing. He sought a young lieutenant, particularly to promote the firm’s expanding sales he appointed Tilly Clennell.”

“She joined Lucas in 1905, and became Australia’s first woman commercial traveller. When she later married, the name of Mrs W D Thompson became a byword among buyers throughout the Commonwealth. ^{ONE} ~~ONCE~~ businessman said of her: “She was the only traveller I can remember who could handle nine different buyers at once and keep them happy”.

At this stage in 1905 E Lucas & Co. had a workforce of fifty five girl machinists. Tilly Clennell then 34 years of age became the first woman in Ballarat to obtain a driver’s licence and believed to be Australia’s first commercial traveller promoting sales to drapers throughout Southern Australia – travelling by motor car similar to an early model “Humberette”. (Refer to the picture in The Golden Thread illustrating this).

Continuing from “The Golden Thread”:-

“Mrs Thompson’s arrival was in a sense a crucial event in history of E. Lucas & Co. The factory had grown beyond recognition, yet in one vitally important aspect it was no different from the “Busy Bee”. It was still an organisation of individuals. One Lucas employee who recently completed fifty years service, summed up its unique character in these words: “If you’re to be happy at work, you must think that whatever you’re doing you are important. With Lucas, all of us could think we were important in the place”.

RETYPE

"If Mr Price, forced to delegate authority outside the family, had chosen an executive with a different sense of values, the Golden Thread of personal responsibility which Eleanor Lucas had first spun might, somewhere along the line, have frayed and snapped."

"But Mrs Thompson was a fiery individualist. She saw everyone else as individuals, whether opposed or in alliance; impatient and impetuous, she brooked no obstacles. It was said of her: "When she came into the factory, you didn't have to look up to see who it was - you heard the whirr of the wheels".

"She proved the right team worker for Mr Price. He knew when to apply the brake, and matched her adventurous flights with a quieter, steadying enterprise of his own. Their relationship was based on a respect for individual quality more enduring than any statutory definition of the rights of employer and employee."

"E. Lucas & Co. remained a prosperous and happy community where output was not dependent upon rigid factory discipline. The secret of its success was genuine co-operation among all who had part in its productivity."

"It was certainly not run by conventional rules. Mrs Thompson thought nothing of taking girls from their machines to watch sunlight on a spring morning flood the hawthorn blossom in the city gardens, or later, during the First World War, to hand out comforts and sing choruses when troop trains drew in or out of the Ballarat station."

"Yet no one suffered from the occasional breaks in routine. In those days, the regulations that governed management - Labor relations were not tight enough to forbid such exuberance. Production did not drop, simply because "the Lucas girls" - as they became affectionately known in Ballarat - returned from the jaunts to finish their day's work, however long it took. They enjoyed these exploits, as friend with friend, but their loyalty to their employer deepened because of them."

"When Mrs. Thompson joined the Lucas Company it was by the standards of the day, a large manufacturing concern. In 1907, two years later, the workforce had grown from 55 to 200 employees mostly female. Within those couple of years, it was so seriously pinched for room in the leased premises in Armstrong Street that Mr. Price decided expansion was essential. In 1907 the historic Phoenix Foundry and its two acre site in Doveton Street, a stone's throw away, came up for sale, and the Lucas Company bought the building and part of the land. The old foundry, which had for several decades produced locomotive engines, was altered to provide 11,000 square feet of work space, and benches were installed to accommodate 160 powered sewing machines." * * *

Those of us who lived through these years will remember that Lucas was held in highest regard as manufacturers of very high class broad loom knitted silk, rayon and nylon fabrics and makers of high class lingerie, nightwear, ladies fashion gowns and articles of clothing, including ladies' dress frocks.

"In 1915 Mrs Lucas retired, and Tilly Thompson was appointed a Director. The business was formed into a limited proprietary company with Mr Price in control. Its founder went to live in Healesville West, next door to the orchard property of her daughter, Mrs Chaffer. She died in Melbourne in October 1923 at the age of 75." * * *

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RETYPE

“When war broke out in 1914, the Lucas girls were in the forefront of civilian Ballarat’s effort to help the fighting men. A record of what they did is still solidly visible in the city, in bricks and mortar and living trees. Their concerted patriotic effort was probably unequalled by any other small working group in the country.”

“The girls’ war activity was at first directed to keeping a YMCA worker at the front – which they did for three years – to sending comforts parcels, and farewelling contingents of soldiers. In 1917, however, a suggestion was made – reputedly by Mrs Thompson – that an avenue of trees should be planted to honor every Ballarat serviceman and nurse who enlisted. Each tree was to bear a plate engraved with the name and unit, and the entrance to the Avenue of Honor was to be marked by a memorial arch.”

* “The idea was sponsored enthusiastically by the Lucas girls, who volunteered to give weekly donations from their pay packets, who with the firm’s support raised a total of 10,600 pounds to finance and maintain the unique monument, which is today a magnificent civic asset. The first instalment of money was the proceeds from a football match waged between the Lucas girls and the Khaki Girls of Melbourne. The home team, of which Mr Price’s eldest daughter Elvie was a member wore short pleated skirts, long-sleeved white jumpers and white knitted tasselled caps.” (Photo of the Lucas girls football team was circulated).

“Ballarat’s Avenue of Honor, planted over more than two years at a cost of 2000 pounds, leads along the Burrumbeet Road into the city. It is nearly fourteen miles long and contains 3,912 trees. The Arch of Victory, the foundation stone of which was laid by General Sir William Birdwood (later Lord Birdwood) was opened by HRH The Prince of Wales on June 2, 1920. It stands as an impressive memorial to the Ballarat citizens whose sacrifice in the holocaust of 1914-1918 assured their city an honorable place in the history of the young Commonwealth. Their compatriots who fought in the Second World War were later linked with them by two tablets set into the Arch and unveiled by Lieut-General Sir Leslie Morshead on November 7, 1954.”

* “Apart from the specific projects for which they assumed group responsibility, the Lucas girls during the war 1914-1918 raised an additional 1,400 pounds for wartime charities, including 600 pound^s for the YMCA and 400 pounds for Red Cross, and gave personal service to numerous patriotic activities which could not be valued in money. Loyalty was, after all, a part of their way of life at Lucas.”

Now we get back to the Courier Saturday 25th February 1954.

“The Lucas Girls”

“The firm’s reputation for cut, quality and finish was unequalled and Mrs Thompson made sure that the buyers knew it. The name of Lucas was a hallmark of quality throughout Australia.”

“Mrs Thompson was not only a first rate business woman, her generosity, kind-heartedness and community spirit are a story in themselves. Miss Elford recalls that if one of the Lucas girls was ill, Mrs Thompson would take her into her own home and care for her until she was well again. Her dynamic leadership and warm-hearted nature were a source of inspiration to the girls.”