



Lest we forget...



Saturday Magazine

...the Lucas girls

by Margaret Rotheram



Mrs Eleanor Lucas, founder of the great firm which grew from the little Busy Bee whitework factory in James St.

Ballarat's famed Arch of Victory and Avenue of Honor, which are as characteristic of the city as the Arc de Triomphe is of Paris, are memorials not only to the defence forces of Australia.

They are a permanent monument to the public spirit of a group of young women, little known to the younger generation but an unforgettable example to their contemporaries — the Lucas Girls.

For patriotic and community service, fund-raising and devotion to duty, probably no group in our city's history has equalled the record of the employees of Ballarat's great clothing manufacturing firm, E. Lucas & Co.

Indicative of their proud role in the community is the heading of The Courier Editorial after V-E (Victoria in Europe) Day... "Hats off to the Lucas Girls!"

The action that prompted it was typical of their spirit of service. While other citizens were celebrating peace on the national holiday, the Lucas Girls spent the day making 150 dressing gowns for Red Cross to distribute to victims of the Nazi tyranny.



** (READ) THE LUCAS GIRLS.*
The stories of their achievements are legion, usually prefaced by an account of the silk pyjamas they embroidered for the former Prince of Wales (later King Edward VIII). Every girl had a hand in making the pyjamas — and dreamed of his wearing them! Loyal poems were written. And snippets from the material were kept to be sold as souvenirs, for fundraising of course!

The pyjamas were presented to him when he visited Ballarat in 1920 to open the Arch of Victory and the Avenue of Honor, funded entirely by the efforts of the Lucas Girls to honor the members of the Armed Forces. There is a tree for every serviceman and woman who enlisted from Ballarat.

Funds were raised by donations, sale of work, buttons, miniature bricks and even a ladies' football match — a daring event nearly 70 years ago!

Press cuttings of the great days of a great firm have been collected by Miss Jean Elford, an Old Lucas Girl, who is organising a reunion of Lucas past employees and staff, men and women, at the Botanic Gardens today.

Jean worked in the despatch department for 28 years: "I think we had the best years of our lives at Lucas's. It was a most interesting time."

Against the present perspective of tense industrial relations and demands, the story of Lucas's is like a legend. The girls could not do enough for the management — "Nobody minded how much they worked," she said. Their loyalty and respect was total: "I have never known anyone who commanded so much respect from his family and everyone as Mr E.H. Price."

In its heyday, there were more than 500 girls working there. Buses used to queue up at the door at lunch hour. In a smaller city, most went home for lunch — and workers' cars were almost unknown.

** The role of women in the story of Lucas is extraordinary for times when women generally lacked opportunity to show their business acumen.*

The firm was founded by a woman, Mrs E. Lucas. Born Eleanor Hargreaves, in Bradford, in 1848, she came to Ballarat in the goldrush days before Eureka. 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.

At 18 she married John Price, a gold prospector, who was killed in 1878 — the year in which his son Edward Hargreaves Price was born.

Widowed and penniless, Mrs Price acquired a sewing machine and began to provide for her four young children in a small cottage in James St. In 1886, she married William Lucas of Sebastopol, but two years later, through a mining accident, she was widowed again.

With the help of her daughters, she built up a prosperous sewing business in "whitework" and had 20 girls employed. In 1896, Mr E. H. Price left a career in cabinet making to take over the management.

In 1903 they moved to larger premises

ises in Armstrong St and had the first electric motor installed in Ballarat. And soon after two historic events happened.

The firm moved into the former Phoenix Foundry premises in Armstrong-Doveton Sts — and Miss M. L. Clennell joined the firm. Miss Clennell, better known to posterity as Mrs Tilly Thompson, MBE, was the founder of "Sunways," an indefatigable community worker, a director of the firm and its first "commercial traveller."

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.

After World War I they not only raised the funds for the Arch of Victory and the Avenue of Honor, but when there was a holdup in the delivery of bricks that threatened to delay the completion date, the Lucas Girls turned up at Selkirks, rolled up their sleeves and loaded the bricks themselves!

During World War II, the firm not only supplied essential civilian needs but supported the war effort by making more than half a million articles from parachutes to uniforms for the Australian defence forces and US Army. They also made some 300,000 mosquito headnets for jungle troops and 100,000 mosquito proof tents and curtains for hospitals.

Not content with production in working hours, the girls raised thousands of pounds for the Missions to Seamen and various patriotic appeals by voluntary pay deductions and the making of toys, aprons and other articles from set up materials. Large sums of money were raised for war relief in Britain by making and exhibiting elaborately dressed dolls.

Many also gave their time to voluntary work and hospitality to visiting troops through organisations such as Red Cross, YMCA and the Comforts Fund.

Over the years the firm expanded in size, advanced in technology and increased in reputation as successive members of the Price family, descendants of Eleanor Lucas, took the reins.

But only two days after V-E Day in May 1945, the history of Lucas's nearly came to an abrupt end. The garment factory was destroyed in one of Ballarat's most spectacular and memorable fires.



Again it was the Lucas Girls who saved the day. The following morning they reported for work as usual, bringing their own sewing machines and patterns and set to work in makeshift premises.

Not a day's pay was lost and, like the legendary Phoenix after which the site was named, a new factory rose again from the ashes.

In 1948 the firm celebrated its 60th anniversary jubilee. A highlight of the festivities was a mannequin parade of fashions through the years at a reunion which packed out the Regent Theatre.

Mr E. H. Price, their beloved director, did not live to see it. He died in 1947 after serving the company for nearly 50 years.

Throughout its history the firm doubled its floor space about every 18 years. It pioneered the use of many new materials in Australia, including the postwar wonder synthetics, such as nylon tricot.

By its 75th anniversary, it was the oldest and largest manufacturing firm of its type in Australia.

Overseas tie-ups were negotiated with firms and designers such as Vanity Fair of New York and Pierre Cardin of Paris.

In 1972 the firm of E. Lucas & Co amalgamated with I. & R. Morley and subsequently became a part of the international Courtauld empire.



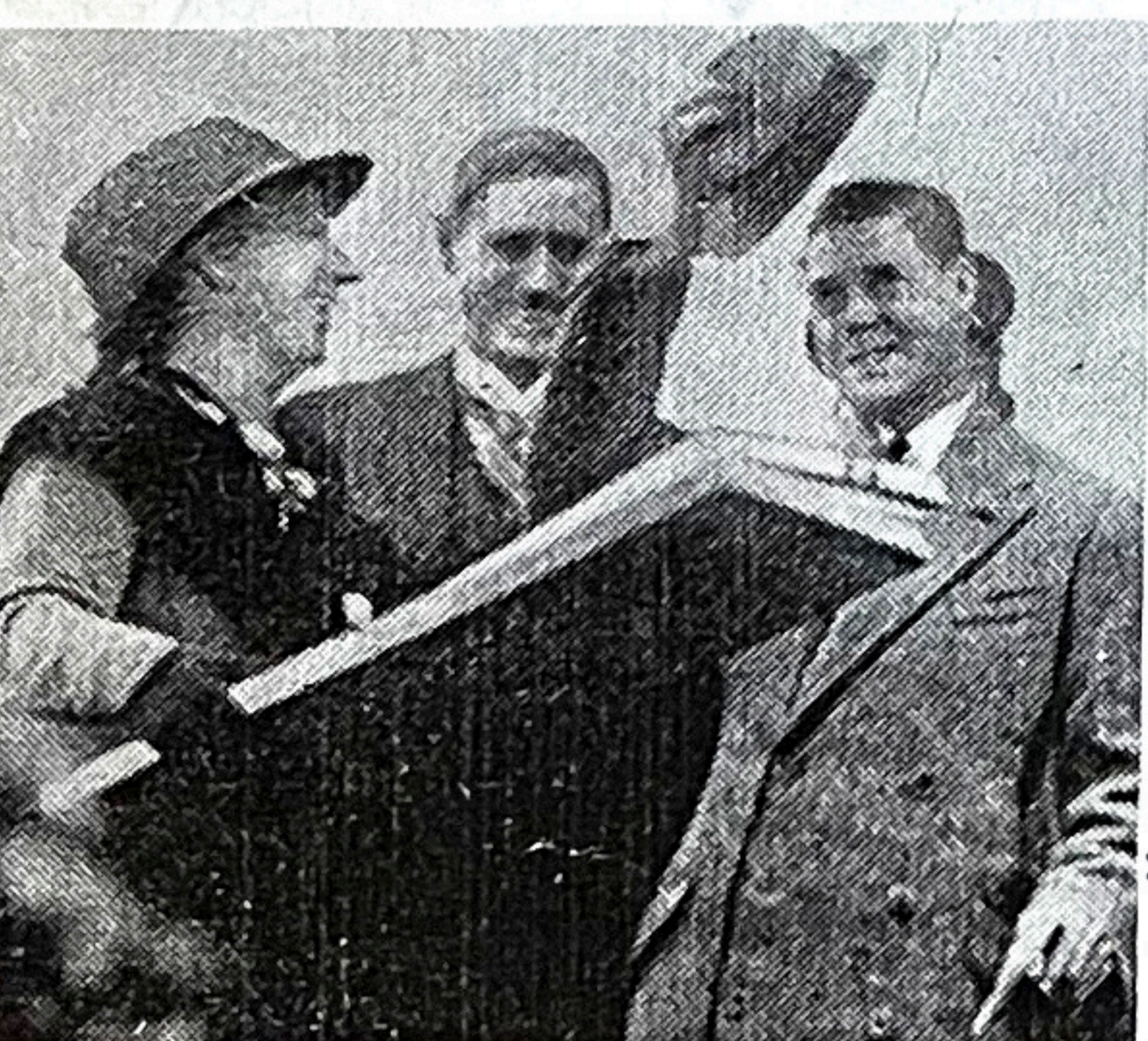
Mrs W. D. (Tilly) Thompson, MBE, the first travelling saleslady for Lucas, who, as Miss M.L. Clennell, became a director when the family firm was incorporated in 1915.



The famous pyjamas given to the Prince of Wales. Made of satin charmeuse, they were embroidered with Australian motifs and the Arch of Victory. Every girl contributed to them.



The machining and cutting section of Lucas's at the time of World War I.



Hats off to the Lucas girls! The Prince of Wales (later Edward VIII) waves his thanks as Mrs Thompson presents a gift of pyjamas made by all the girls. With them is Major Baird, MLA.



Crowds thronged around the Arch of Victory when it was opened by the Prince of Wales on June 2, 1920. The funds for the Arch and the Avenue of Honor were raised by the Lucas girls.



Glamorous pre-war gowns of 1938 highlighted Lucas's 50th anniversary.



When industrial trouble delayed delivery of bricks needed urgently for the Arch of Victory, the Lucas Girls (with Mrs Thompson and Mr Lucas) loaded the trucks themselves.

INCIDENTALLY — HER BUSINESS WAS KNOWN AS 'BUSY BEE' AT AGED 18 YEARS