

THE LIFE AND WORK OF TILLY THOMPSON

Research and talk by Roy D. Mosman

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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 12 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", 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. She came to Ballarat in the gold-rush 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 (how incredible, 2 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 secondhand 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 2nd. 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)."

"With the help of her three daughters, she built up a prosperous sewing business in "Whitework" (childrens' and ladies underwear was known as Whitework in those days) and had 20 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 Thread":-

"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 firms 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 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 55 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 50 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".

"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 upto 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 220 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 seventy-five.

"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 pounds 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."

"After World War 1 they not only raised funds for the Arch of Victory and the Avenue of Honor, but when there was a hold up 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!" - (What a woman. Tilly Thompson would have sent them)."

"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!" (perhaps they dreamed of being there too!) Loyal poems were written, and snippets from the material were kept to be sold as souvenirs, for fund raising of course!"

"The pyjamas were presented to him when he visited Ballarat in June 1920 to open the Arch of Victory and the Avenue of Honor. Funds were also raised by donations, sale of work, buttons, miniature bricks and even a ladies football match, a daring event nearly 70 years ago." (that comment was - of course from the Courier written February 1954).

(I remember those little bricks - they were about $1\frac{1}{2} \times \frac{3}{4} \times \frac{3}{4}$ inches , they had an eyelet on top with a red, white and blue ribbon threaded through and a pin at the top, and cost about one shilling, I think.)

Also - it was mentioned to me by Miss Marjorie Todd, a niece of Tilly's, that she had a copper down the street, for people to throw money into, probably had to stand guard too.

I can remember being there at the opening. I was standing at the back (in the picture circulated) with our family close to the mounted police. I was a small boy of six, and thought the Prince of Wales was wonderful, I had a picture of him in my bedroom, and what you learn at six, you remember all your life. Royalty apparently at times have a number of Christian names; my picture of the Prince in 1920 read -"Edward, Albert, Christian, George, Andrew, Patrick, David, of Windsor, Prince of Wales"

(What follows now is mainly) my own research with the assistance of Peter Mansfield of the Municipal Library, who wrote an article on Mrs Tilly Thompson published in the Courier on 4th February, 1989, made available to me by the Supervisor of Sunways, my own personal recollections and references already referred to earlier.

I have not found any direct reference to the cost of erection of the "Arch of Victory", although the trees cost 2,000 pounds, so possibly the Arch cost 8,600 pounds of the total sum raised of 10,600 pounds, but Tilly Thompson was reported to have 'phoned Mr. Robert Selkirk, (Founder of the firm), asking if he would donate the bricks. (to which he had to agree - of course). There could well have been quite a lot of volunteer labour for brick-laying etc. as well, knowing Tilly's power to move people!

I should have mentioned earlier that Tillyⁿ Clenell married William Daniel Thompson, born in 1858, while Tilly was born in 1871, a wealthy mining agent and manager, after his first wife Annie died in 1913, and left him with six children - when he was 55 years of age - probably mostly grown up by that time.

Miss Marjorie Todd, Tilly's niece referred to earlier and still living at Sunways recalled there were three step-daughters all nurses. Tilly had travelled to Europe for Lucas during the earlier years of her time with the firm to study fashion trends and also research the latest in machine development.

By the way, the Arch structure is hollow inside (of Course). I recall when at Ballarat High School one lunch time about 1928 or 1929 several boys came back saying -"We've been climbing around inside the Arch". I did not believe this thinking another tall story, big solid structure of bricks and cement. I lived for many years with this mysterious and almost impossible thing in disbelief until recently while waiting to meet a grand-daughter from High School and reading inscriptions on the south end, half way up there is a small trap-door the same color as the cement; so the boys climbed up clinging on to the projecting slabs, and were able to enter. So if any of you ladies would like to check my story and climb up like the boys did you will find the door padlocked.

Tilly Thompson retired from E. Lucas & Co. Pty. Ltd. in 1926 (The Golden Thread) - and quote "To spend her indefatigable energies in world travel and in public spirited activities in Ballarat." She was then 55 years of age.

Her husband, William D. Thompson died in 1927. Soon after his death Tilly decided to travel overseas mostly through Europe and Russia, returning to Ballarat in 1933, some five years later.

Her original family home in Wendouree Parade as at 510/512 on the northern shore of Lake Wendouree, known as "Homeleigh" built probably in the 1880's of Victorian era style, with spacious lounge, three bedrooms, study and sunroom with superb outlook over the lake. It was auctioned on 5th April, 1995, under its changed name of "Green Shores". (Refer to Courier Real Estate Guide, copy circulated.)

On returning from overseas in 1933, Tilly became very interested in health, nutrition and exercise which she called "Radiant Health". She started exercise classes at the City Hall (I think) for women, and continued this elsewhere for years. Even later when 80 years she actively encouraged people to improve their diet, adopt sound religious principles and become more healthy.

In 1939 her dream house "Sunways" was built to her own design, innovative ideas and plan with the help of her builder, David Quayle at 418/420 Wendouree Parade.

She continued her charitable work in retirement and helped so many people in so many and numerous ways too numerous to know all about, but including Ballarat Base Hospital, Churches and sporting groups. I recall she organised a big Ballarat wide Raffle of a Forest Street house opposite the Jubilee Kindergarten for 1/- (one shilling) per ticket, almost everyone in Ballarat bought tickets and went through the house. I think it was to aid Red Cross.

She was an **active** member and benefactor of the Jubilee Methodist Church for many years of her life, and in the publication "Centenary Celebrations 1860 to 1960" was listed in the thanks and appreciations as "Mrs Matilda Thompson, Church Benefactor and friend of all".

In 1950 and 1951 she had gifted land at the rear of the church tennis courts in Gregory Street and made a substantial donation for the church to purchase the tennis court land previously leased from her.

Tilly had also formed a friendship with Tom Toop, curator of the Botanical Gardens, which she dearly loved, and it is so fitting that we, the Friends of the Gardens have a memorial garden in her memory which we have helped to maintain. Tom Toop was also a member of the Jubilee Church, following in the footsteps of George Longley also a good churchman, a foundation committeeman, superintendent of the Sunday School and bell-ringer for all services for most years of his life. (incidentally Fred Clennell followed him as bell-ringer). (A photo of Tom Toop with Tilly Thompson was then circulated.)

Tilly also arranged for the Rev. Lelean, a Methodist Minister to use Sunways to interview and diagnose the medical problems for his patients and conducted health and exercises in her lounge room.

To crown her Life's achievements in 1939 Tilly Thompson was awarded the gold medal of RSSAILA (now RSL) and later in 1941 New Years honours list, at the age of 70 the high award of MBE, which we must all agree was richly deserved for her life-long devotion to helping charities and other public spirited activities.

Now on a personal note, I cannot recall ever personally meeting Mrs Tilly Thompson, but she was so well known to so many Ballarat people most of us felt we knew her. My father would have met her as long ago as 1920 and they kept in touch for years. In the early life of the trees he had worked with Mr. Selmon, land-scape gardener of Gnarr Street, off Wendouree Parade who had a maintenance contract with Tilly to care for the Avenue trees for many years from 1920 onwards, watering, checking tree guards, tying up and replacing any trees which died. In later years when the poplars suckered Tilly would have him out there grubbing them out.

As a horticulturist he always took a life time interest in the trees and loved to watch their growth and progress. He also cared for her garden at Sunways and I recall her telling him not to rake up the autumn leaves on the lawns until all had fallen, as she loved to see them falling from her bay windows. (reminding her no doubt of the European fall).

Not everyone knows this or realises that the Avenue continues on after the left turn from the western highway beyond Lake Burrumbeet on the narrower road towards Weatherboard and Learmonth. Now with the Freeway the motorist has to enter the Freeway, turn right for some distance and then left towards this narrower road. The Avenue ends where this road turns right to Learmonth. Tilly wanted a monument to mark the end of the Avenue; so it would be probably in the late 1940's or early 1950's she decided on a rock cairn on the left corner, and my dad built it for Tilly.

She would call for him on Saturday afternoons by car, reading and waiting in the car while he built up the rocks in a wide circle about a metre high and a big pile of rocks in the centre with a metal cross on top and inscription, "Lest we forget". (a photo of this was circulated).

A plaque on the monument also bears the following inscription:-

"They buckled their belts about them,
They crossed in ships the sea,
They fought and found six feet of ground,
And died for you and me."

The design of the cairn reminds me of the Scouts and Guides sign, "Gone Home".

With her life's work completed Tilly Thompson died in hospital on 7th April, 1959, she would be aged 88 on 28th April of that year, and was buried at the Ballarat Old Cemetery and so ended the earthly life of a most remarkable woman. But the memory of Mrs Tilly Thompson did not die. As is so well known, by her will she left her beloved home "Sunways" to the Uniting Church. Her niece Miss Marjorie Todd told me her original intention was to provide a holiday home for the elderly poor who could not afford to go away for holidays; but I am sure she would be most pleased with it's present use as a permanent home for the elderly, and with the expanded facilities right through to Gregory Street.

Now I would like to say that researching the life and work of Tilly Thompson has given me a feeling of pride and privilege that we had in Ballarat a citizen and a woman of her tremendous drive and enthusiasm, and I still like that compliment paid when she joined at Lucas in 1905 - "Terrifying Energy".

So her legend will live on in one particular respect because of her bequest of "Sunways" and also as I would ask - where else in Australia is there an Arch of Victory and an Avenue of Honour with 14 miles of trees which pays tribute to those who so bravely enlisted, fought and died for freedom and peace in our world?

As time permitted, at this stage Mrs Tilly Thompson's home "Sunways", Wendouree Parade, as written up and illustrated in The Australian Home Beautiful, April 1939, "Vibrating with Sunshine and Glass" was read to the audience.

(This concluded the talk)

The following photos and publications annexed hereto were handed around to the audience:-

- Extracts from "The Golden Thread.
 - Courier, Saturday February 25, 1984, Lest we Forget --- the Lucas Girls, with accompanying pictures.
 - "Sunways", "Vibrating with Sunshine and Glass".
 - Enlarged photo of Tilly Thompson.
 - Photo of Mrs W. D. Thompson from The Golden Thread.
 - Laying the foundation stone - Arch of Victory Feb. 1920.
 - Photo Mrs Thompson's first car, travelling sales lady.
 - Tilly Thompson with Tom Toop.
 - Former home "Homeleigh", Wendouree Parade, April 1, 1995, now renamed "Green Shores".
 - Photo of the rock cairn at the end of the Avenue.
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