A Hole in Her Stocking
Ups and Downs in a Colourful Carlton Childhood

Who would have thought that waiting for her friend to change her stocking could have made such a difference?

This account of Bea's early life is based on interviews recorded for the Carlton Community History Group in January and February 2010. Italics indicate direct quotations.

When "Bea" (not her real name) was born in 1924, her parents were living in Nicholson Street, Carlton, quite close to Princes Street. Her sister joined the family three years later. Their father Roger worked in the boot trade and was always very poorly paid. The family moved briefly to Cecil Street, Fitzroy, and Bea thinks her mother Maud may have tried to run a boarding house there to supplement their income. In 1930 the family moved to three- storeyed 27 Rathdowne Street, opposite the Exhibition Gardens, where they had what was called at the time an apartment. Unlike today, this did not then mean self-contained accommodation, but a room or rooms sharing kitchen and bathroom with other residents.

Next door to 27 Rathdowne Street, right on the Victoria Street corner, was the Queen's Coffee Palace. Begun in 1888 it was planned as a magnificent building with an enormous ground floor dining hall covered by an ornamental glass roof, bedroom accommodation for 350 guests and two lifts to manage luggage. Another feature was to be a promenade platform on the roof, offering superb views in all directions. However, its backers fell into financial difficulties and the building was not completed until the late 1890s. But by then this part of Rathdowne Street was socially depressed and deteriorated further in the 1920s.[1]

In 1929 the Catholic Church bought and renovated the former coffee palace as St Anne's Hall, a hostel for girls from the country who worked or studied in Melbourne. The hostel was run by nuns from the Daughters of Charity, originally a French order, who first arrived in Australia from England in 1926. The nuns were well known for helping the poor and disadvantaged, and were a striking sight with their habits based on 17th century peasant clothing and their enormously wide headgear. St Anne's Hall opened in 1930, with accommodation for over 150 girls. A fire in 1963 caused major damage to the mansard roof and upper storey, changing the appearance of the building. St Anne's closed in December 1970 and the building was sold and demolished in 1971.[2] [3] [4] [5]

Both of Bea's parents came from big families; each had 11 siblings. Maud's mother had married twice (the first time at 15) and had six children by each husband. Maud was in the middle of the second family. She had been brought up near Albury, New South Wales, and when she reached working age had followed three half sisters to Melbourne. They were living in Drummond Street and formed a strong family community. Bea often went to the aunts to listen to radio programs and recalls frequently playing in the evening on the grass in Drummond Street. Before her marriage Maud had worked at the MacRobertson factory in Fitzroy but by the time they were living in Rathdowne Street she was earning extra money by helping a friend who had a dressmaking business in the Centreway Arcade, making beautiful garments by hand, her daughter says, and buying their fabrics at Hicks Atkinson department store a little further up Collins Street.

After a couple of years at number 27 the family moved to another apartment building, 59 Rathdowne Street, a two storey house (now demolished) a little further north and closer to Queensberry Street. This house was bought as a going concern by a distant relative who ran a country store near Charlton and wanted somewhere for her family to stay on their frequent visits to Melbourne. One area was kept aside

for them and Maud was given the job of running the rest of the building in return for rent-free accommodation. There were no other families with children at 59 Rathdowne Street and many of the apartments were in fact single rooms. Each one had its own kitchenette but they were clustered together at the back of the house which had had bits built on to it. For example, there were three or four rooms at the back facing the yard. Bea estimates that about twenty people would have been living there in the late 1930s. There was one bathroom; you had to line up and pay extra for a bath too. Apartment houses were quite distinct from boarding houses. No meals were provided but Bea and her mother and sister did a bit of cleaning and tidying for the single men (the single women looked after themselves) and provided them with clean bed linen.

The location of 59 Rathdowne Street made it much busier and more sociable than the earlier house. Bea says that at this time, the 1930s, virtually every house in Rathdowne and Drummond Streets in the block between Victoria and Queensberry Streets had been turned into apartments. It was cheap accommodation and there were lots of itinerant people in the area, circus performers, people with goods to sell at the show, lots of Communists too who spent most of their time letter-boxing. She remembers particularly a group of three Communist men living together in one room at the back of the house at number 59. One of them, she says, was an intellectual and a leader. His father had a publishing firm in the docks area and he was not badly off but the others were extremely poor. Bea's father was a staunch labor and union man but a bit wary of the Communists. Audrey and Jack Blake were prominent members of the Communist Party at this time and Audrey's mother had an apartment at 59 Rathdowne Street. Audrey herself was the first Secretary of the Eureka Youth League, a Communist Party offshoot formed in 1941 with a strong anti-fascist emphasis, which flourished during the war, its membership reaching 1000. It is not surprising that at one point Bea joined the EYL and for a time attended their meetings in Elizabeth Street. But her father was very opposed to this and she didn't continue. It was *not worth the hassle at home.*

It was a lively area to be living in and Bea recalls much coming and going in the streets at night. Some of the foot traffic was made up of members from the vigorously anti-fascist Italian Matteotti Club which flourished from 1927 to 1933 and had its headquarters at "Horti Hall", on the corner of Victoria and Russell Streets. It had been built in 1873 for the Victorian Horticultural Society but by the 1930s was being used by a wide range of organisations. Another familiar sight in the early evening was the huge horse-drawn drays of the Carlton & United Brewery travelling down Victoria Parade and on to Abbotsford, their deliveries for the day completed.

Bea also remembers considerable noise coming from the direction of the Exhibition Building. A cycling race track, the Oval, to the north of the building, roughly where the museum is now, was a prominent feature of the area as early as the 1880s. Over the years floodlighting was installed and grandstands seating many thousands. In later decades motorcycle races were held there and after World War 1 there was a craze for motorpacing, where each motorcycle was followed by a cyclist using him as a pacemaker and shelter. Hubert Opperman came to dominate this event at the Oval. The noise and spectacle made it very attractive to spectators and this must be what Bea is remembering. Obviously it was a very dangerous sport and after a cyclist died in 1938 it fell into disfavour.[6]

Her father was an avid reader and Bea says they *practically lived* at the Lending Library then attached to the State Library in the city. He was an excellent singer too and was often called upon to entertain at union smoke nights. There were no family holidays and she did not go on visits to her country relatives until later when she was working. Sometimes the Drummond Street aunts would hire a furniture van for an excursion to beaches like Carrum but swimming pools were not part of her life. One outing she does remember as very special was going into the city by cable tram (a rare treat) to see the light on the top of the T & G building, first installed in 1934.

As a child Bea would rarely go north of Grattan Street except for visits to the Carlton cinema and shopping at one delicatessen just north of King and Godfree's grocery on the corner of Faraday and Lygon Streets. Her father shopped at the market every weekend. But the southern end of Lygon Street was very important for shopping. A good friend of the family had a large grocery store on the north west corner of Lygon and Queensberry and there was another almost opposite. On the corner where Lamb's is now there was a big milk bar which had a jukebox when Bea was a teenager. There would always be someone she knew in the shops so running errands was a very social activity. The children did most of it, a few items at a time. *When you ran out, you bought* is the way Bea puts it.

When the family lived in Nicholson Street, Bea had begun school at St Brigid's, almost opposite her home. Moving to Rathdowne Street meant a change of school and she transferred to St George's on the corner of Pelham and Drummond Streets. Today it is a Catholic seminary. Directly opposite the school was the Children's Hospital and she remembers during the polio epidemic of the late 1940s seeing the children lined up on the balcony in their iron lungs. They'd exchange greetings with the school children in the street. When patients were discharged, their mothers would wheel their beds to Yooralla, a hospital school for children with physical disabilities then housed on the south east corner of Pelham and Lygon Streets.

At St George's boys and girls, taught respectively by the Christian Brothers (*a very firm lot)* and the Sisters of Charity, were strictly separated. At that time the original St George's church, built in the 1850s and still standing today, was used as a classroom by the boys' school. The nuns came from the Charity convent in East Melbourne and used to walk through the park every morning. One lay teacher *took quite a shine* to Bea. *I wasn't too bad at my work.* She lived at St Anne's Hall and *she'd come up like a ship in full sail. I had to wait at the school gate for her every morning .It made for a terrible couple of years; no one wanted to talk to me. She was a real villain of a teacher.* There weren't many lay teachers but they *carried a lot of weight.*

The school had very little open space and although the kids often played in the Exhibition Gardens, the school did not use it for organised sporting activities. In fact Bea remembers very little in the way of sport. But she does remember the yabbies in the ponds in the gardens. At the end of year 8 she obtained her Merit Certificate, the only member of her class to do so, although some others were given a chance to re-sit the exam after the end of the school year. The examination for this certificate, introduced in 1912 and abolished in 1947, marked the end of formal education for the great majority of children and was seen as an avenue into employment. Subjects assessed were reading, spelling, composition writing, arithmetic, history, geography, elementary science and manual training. Since 1901 the school leaving age had been 14 but those who had already passed the Merit Certificate could leave at 13.

At the end of grade six Bea had been encouraged by the nuns to sit for the Carr Prize, a religious scholarship, but she was not successful. At the end of grade seven they again pressed her, this time to take the scholarship exam which provided entry to St Ita's, a one-year program housed at St Brigid's. Its sole aim was to coach girls for the Junior Scholarship exam at the end of year eight. If you won this government scholarship it would cover most of the cost of books, uniform and fees for years nine to twelve at the school of your choice which for girls from St Ita's was Santa Maria College in Northcote. For many girls this scholarship was their only chance of continuing past year eight.

The nuns concentrated on me but the home situation was bad, there was no time at night, you were all crowded in together and my father's drinking was always a real problem. His abuse was only ever verbal. He was a very gentle man, an intellectual in his way, a self-taught man. If we ever came home from school with a question he couldn't answer, he'd be down at the library within the hour. Then it all went pear-shaped. Sometimes in work, sometimes out of work. It was the Depression of course. We only had one big living room and my mother loved to talk. There were a couple of women living in the apartment house who'd be

knocking on the door and asking to come in when we'd barely finished dinner. It drove my father crazy and kept my mother sane.

A friend and schoolmate living in Rathdowne Street whose mother worked at the convent was also a scholarship candidate. On the morning of the exam Bea called round to collect the other girl but she was not ready: she wanted to change her stocking which had a hole in it. They were late by the time they walked across the park and up to St Brigid's. *The nuns were up on the balcony, frantic because their numbers were short and screaming Hurry up! You're running late*. The girls raced into the classroom and Bea was not surprised when the first question was about religion because all exams started like that. However, she hadn't got very far into the paper when she thought it looked very like the Carr Prize paper in the previous year. And of course that's what it was. They were in the wrong classroom. No one realised what had happened until she put her hand up. *The nuns nearly went crazy*. *What are we going to do?* But they didn't do anything. It was too late.

The news got back to school before we did, says Bea. *The annoying part was that I had got there on time and then had to wait for her. She was one of the people I kept in touch with after marriage but one day I thought I should really never have spoken to her again.* Whether her family situation would have allowed her to take up the scholarship to St Ita's is another question. Bea was fourteen. The money she could earn was needed by the family. *The nuns were furious that I didn't do as well as I should have.* But that was the end of her schooldays and it was off to work for Bea.

Working Life

In 1938 her first job was a sewing position at the Collins Street department store Hicks Atkinson but she was *totally inept* and soon found a post that suited her much better. This was as a junior, running errands and making tea, in the head office of Rockman's who at the time had a string of stores across Melbourne and an extensive mail order business. The office was in Masons Lane, off Little Collins Street near Swanston Street. She was still a junior when the war began but soon progressed to work in the despatch section. Much of Rockman's manufacturing was done by Jewish businesses in Flinders Lane and garments were delivered to head office by men pushing large clothing racks. Bea's role was to process mail orders by taking garments from the racks and passing them on to the packers, men who stood at huge tables, folding the clothes in tissue paper and putting them into boxes. Gradually her job expanded to include a *bit of book work*, something that was to be very important for her whole working life. Some of the workers there were recently migrated Russian Jews. Members of the large Rockman family were in the office every day. *They were nice people but they expected a high level of commitment to the job.* Until she married Bea took it for granted that she would hand over her wages to her mother and get a little returned as pocket money.

The outbreak of war in 1939 enabled her father to get a better job in a munitions factory but in 1942 he was hit by a car and killed one night as he was getting off the bus coming home from work. *He was the worst pedestrian in the world,* says Bea. She feels that by this time there was not much left of the marriage, partly because of his heavy drinking which created *purgatory* although he was *a gentle soul* and never violent. His death put Maud in a quandary and she thought that now, in her 50s, she would have to get a factory job. She was in fact offered a job at the factory right next door run by a Syrian family, the Haddads. But a better solution was found when a good friend of hers for many years, a Frenchman living at number 59 and working as a chef at Menzies Hotel, offered to buy a property at 166 Victoria Parade, East Melbourne which she could run as apartments. As a house it was far superior to 59 Rathdowne Street. The rooms were enormous and the position directly in front of the cathedral was excellent. But the kitchenettes were still clustered together at the back of the house. It later became the nurses' home for the Eye and Ear Hospital.

The mother of one of Bea's friends was the matron at the City Watchhouse and one vivid memory of the war years is seeing in custody there the notorious Eddie Leonski, an American soldier who arrived in Melbourne in February 1942 and between May 3 and May 18 murdered three women. The administration of justice was rapid: he confessed and was sentenced to death at a court martial in July and in November, at the age of 24, hanged at Pentridge Prison. The press called him *the Brownout Strangler*, a reference to Melbourne's wartime strategy of keeping lighting low.

During the war Bea served as an air raid warden and went out on patrols with her gas mask ensuring that regulations were being observed. This volunteer activity was organised by a member of the Elliot family who ran the huge soft drink factory in Rathdowne Street.

Another vivid picture from the war years is seeing a column of uniformed members of the RAAF marching down a path in the Exhibition Gardens each morning on their way to the city. They were technical trainees billeted at the Exhibition while doing their training at a variety of city locations. In 1942 as many as two thousand men were accommodated there and the RAAF had control not only of the building but also of the surrounding area from 1941 to 1946.

The most important effect of the war on Bea, however, was on her employment. As the war progressed, women she knew began joining up. She was attracted to the idea but felt that her now widowed mother needed her support at home. Then about 1943 she was called up and sent to do clerical work at the Allied Works Council, established in 1942 to provide equipment and materials required by the Allied forces. The shortage of labour at this time was desperate and various means were tried to attract women into the workforce. As a last resort in October 1942 the compulsory call up of women was authorised, limited at first to childless widow and single women aged 20 – 30. Asked whether she felt resentful at being forced to leave her job at Rockman's, Bea says she was surprised but didn't really mind and in fact it turned out to be a most enlightening period of her life because she was mixing with a much broader social group than ever before, from a wide range of occupations. Among them were people associated with the Vienna Boys Choir, stranded in Australia by the outbreak of war in 1939, passing through the office as enemy aliens before being sent off to the country. Many of the people working at AWC were doing so because it exempted them from army service.

American servicemen, reviled by local men as *overpaid, oversexed and over here,* were an important part of the social scene at the time. Many of the girls at AWC were going out with or even engaged to Americans. One, a receptionist, was the envy of the office when, after her fiancé had gone back to active duty in the islands, she received a daily delivery from a florist, a small corsage which she pinned to her dress for the rest of the day.

At the Allied Works Council Bea was working with the head of the record-keeping department and as the war was drawing to a close he was offered a managerial job at Bruce Small's flourishing business, *Malvern Star Cycles,* and asked Bea if she would work with him which she did. It was about this time that she met her future husband. He too was at Allied Works having previously been in the army. Bea had been at Bruce Small's only three or four months when she was again called up but her employer applied successfully for an exemption. She stayed in that job until she was married, receiving valuable training on accountancy machines, and remembers them as happy days. Many well-known cyclists were constantly in and out of the building including Hubert Opperman, popular cycling star and a close friend and business associate of Bruce Small. For the first time she was not working in the heart of the city but in King Street (now Kings Way) across the river with a view of the Robur Tea building. Rationing didn't impinge much on her life (Maud would probably not have said the same) although she does remember how awful the *ersatz* coffee was but she does remember that while she was at Bruce Small's a colleague lost all her belongings in a house fire and the women there all contributed coupons to help her replace her clothes.

Postscript

Bea married soon after the war, raised a family of four, eventually acquired an accountancy qualification and worked as a bookkeeper. Finally she completed her secondary education at University High and Princes Hill High and was accepted into an arts degree at La Trobe University where she majored in art history and Italian. She was 64 when she started her degree. The nuns had been right about her fifty years before when they urged her to take the scholarship exam. That hole in her schoolmate's stocking has a lot to answer for. Bea found the atmosphere of La Trobe with lots of mature age students most congenial. She was also influenced by a number of older (in their 40s) female political activists. *It was the highlight of my life,* she says.

Bea died in May 2017, aged 93 years. Her memory lives on in this story, and in the hearts of her family and friends.

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References:

[1] *Illustrated Australian News*, 23 June 1888, p. 122
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[4] *Advocate*, 15 May 1930, p. 13-14
[5] *Herald*, 2 November 1970, p. 2
[6] *The Argus*, 18 November 1938, p4