

Twenty-Seven-And  
-A- Half

The Story of Mrs Edna  
Bailey

recorded and edited in 2010 by Anna-Rose Shack

Edna Bailey sits in her large chair, by the window, in a room at the Collier Park Nursing Home. On my first visit I was emphatically assured that she was barely twenty-seven and a half, a sprightly youth! However our time together has shown me that all of the experiences and stories Edna holds could never have squeezed into a measly couple of decades.

Edna was born in Devon, England in 1912 in a little town called Ilfracombe. Her parents were John Henry Reed and Aida Mathilda Reed, born in 1876 and 1880 respectively. She was the third child after her brother Roy and sister Vera and four years later her younger brother Harry was born.

Every summer holidays she used to stay at her Aunty Carrie's house in Newton-Abbot, near Exeter in Devon. She was the only child to go and thus thought that "maybe my Mum got tired of me!" It was here that Edna learnt much of her Bible as Aunt Carrie read it to her every night. Psalm 103 was Auntie Carrie's favourite psalm and she remembers it to this day.

When she was twelve years old, Edna was tested for illness before the family emigrated to Australia. It was thought that she had Tuberculosis and she was nearly made to stay behind with Aunt Carrie. Fortunately she was cleared and thus in 1924, the family set sail on the SS Baradine for a new life in Australia. It was a six week journey and as they sailed around the Cape of Good Hope, Mrs Bailey is proud to announce to this day, that she's been to South Africa for a day and a half! Soon after leaving Cape Town there was a terrible storm and boards were placed around the edges of tables to protect the crockery. All of her siblings were seasick and each morning Edna, "a very tough child" had to fetch their breakfast.

On arrival in Fremantle, Western Australia, they had only what they had brought with them in suitcases. At one time all Edna

can remember having in her home is a single chair. However her father worked hard and little by little they built up their family home and life in Australia.

Throughout her life Edna has said that "I thank God for my friends; they have been my saviours." She has "collected" many friends along the way; lovely people from her church, work, choirs and anywhere in between! Edna's first and closest friend in Australia was Ivy Moore, until she passed away in the late 1980s. Throughout their lives they moved around a lot, had families and were very busy so could not see each other as much as they would have liked. However when they did meet, it was as if they had never been apart.

Evelyn was a dear friend from Maylands Church and when they were in their 20s she offered to pay Edna's fare to travel to New Zealand and become a Mormon with her. However Edna couldn't give up her life and change her view of Christianity. Besides, strong Mormons don't drink tea and Edna has always loved her daily cup of English Breakfast!

Edna spent many wonderful hours in the company of friends from her Christian Endeavour group. They would take a picnic and all catch the train up to Darlington or Bell View. Often there were at least seventeen of them in a carriage and the conductor couldn't believe that they all could fit! They would have a wonderful day outdoors before rushing back to Perth in time to go to the pictures, before the boys would walk the girls home. Edna muses that unfortunately "It doesn't happen like that anymore!" They held a debating club once a month and had many celebrations for birthdays. Charades was a popular game and one time, a mock wedding was staged despite fact that the two bridesmaids and the bride were boys!

One day a man came to the door selling insurance and kept on coming back until he took Edna for their first date to the Inglewood Picture Theatre to see "A Star is Born" starring Judy Garland and James Mason! This man was Harold Bailey and by 1939 they were engaged. They were married in 1940 in Maylands Church and Edna's friend, Bonnie Walker, sang a beautiful rendition of 'My Prayer' during the service. There was a large reception of sixty to seventy people, costing 3s6d a head; expensive for the time! They honeymooned in Albany in the

South of Western Australia after having stayed for one night in Nannup.

After the honeymoon they had to live for the first week in a hotel on Beaufort Street in Perth, before they rented a house in South Perth, staying there for fourteen years. After that they decided to build a house in South Perth and found a home for the six weeks of construction in a caravan parked on the block. Dinner was cooked in the open but every night they had a main meal and sweets. They also had to bathe in a tub! Unfortunately that November had to be the wettest Edna can remember! Each day Edna would give the various builders and craftsmen tea. However one day they whined for cream buns. In indignation she stomped down to the shops, bought the buns and told them she had made them herself! Rightly so, they were heartily ashamed of themselves!

When the house was finished there were several levels connected by a couple of steps. The ground floor was christened Kensington Palace and the first floor, Buckingham Palace. It wasn't quite a royal palace but it was a lovely house that was to become their family home for the next thirty-seven years.

Sadly Edna's first daughter Susan Mary did not survive birth and Edna never saw her. It wasn't until a few years ago that Edna's dear friend Kaye stepped in saying, "Auntie Edna, you're always talking about Susan" and with that helped her to find the records of where she was buried. It was this that helped Edna to find some closure.

Ian was born in 1942 though unfortunately, three weeks after he was born, Harold had to leave to serve in the Australian Army. She remembers being so overwhelmed at the prospect of sleeping in her house alone with her baby but she managed, saying, "What else could you do?"

Robin was the second boy, born in 1943 and in 1949 Jan followed. The boys attended Forrest Street primary and then went on to Kent Street School for the later years. Jan went to Koonawarra Primary and Applecross High School. Ian grew up and earned a Doctorate in Physics, Robin a degree in Electrical Engineering and Jan a degree in Social Work. "I am proud of them all, they've all done well."

One of the most exciting things at home was the arrival of the telephone. Edna never left her children home by themselves for long but one afternoon she was out so she rang home to see what they were up to. Her son Robin answered the phone and though she asked several times, "what are you doing?" the only answer she got was, "talking to you on the telephone, you dope!" On the afternoons Edna was at choir practice she often left a note for her children with a list of things to do such as preparing the vegetables, and with it a piece of chocolate as a treat. It wasn't until later that she found out that they knew where it was kept and were helping themselves as they pleased!

Edna was always exceedingly busy with family and many other commitments. Thus, in the tradition of a bygone era, she was remarkably organised with Mondays for washing and Tuesdays for ironing. With so many boys there were frequently fifteen to eighteen shirts to wash and press. The socks were also a nightmare and when she did mini-washes through the week, "there must have been millions of them!" Edna thought that all the socks pegged on the line looked like a centipede! Often, local Aboriginals would visit selling long two pronged sticks to prop up sagging washing lines. They were very popular and quite a necessary addition until the Hills Hoist was invented. It took Edna a long time to get used to the Hoist contraption! All of the socks also had to be darned and Edna took pride in that "none of them ever had any holes."

Whenever she was shopping for clothes Edna told her friends;

"Never show me a green dress."

"Why?" they would enquire. "Are you superstitious?"

"No! If I see a green dress I'll buy it!"

Edna still loves to wear green!

One year, Edna was approached and asked if she would assist with taking a group to Riverbank Detention Centre for a couple of months. Each month a group of girls would be taken to the centre to dance with the boys, socialise and "let them know that there are good girls." They were there to help "lift the boys up." One Saturday night a month they had a merry time of barn dances and an evening in which no female could sit down! Her

time at Riverbank ended up lasting ten years and formed a very important part of her life. In the early days she was asked to come and look after John, who was notorious for "having something against women". Naturally Edna was a little concerned about their first meeting. However he always asked her for a dance and they talked for a long time as friends.

Christian Endeavour also played a significant role in Edna's life. The organisation was founded by Francis Clark in the United States, towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. It rapidly became a very international organisation which united all sorts of people. She remembers that, "We weren't white or black, we were Christian Endeavourers!" All the ecumenical churches in her area were involved and it was a program of great success and happiness. The children from these churches were brought together and put into different focus groups depending on their age but regardless of church denomination, gender or any other factor. Each group had its own purpose such as the Missionary group writing to missionaries or the Sunshine committee delivering the church flowers to sick congregation members. The program encouraged children to organise themselves, learn to speak and to get to know others by working in a team. It trained them for later life and made them busy doing something good. Edna took the pledge in 1929 as a young girl and continued on to become a youth leader, the Superintendent of WA for five years and eventually to send her own children to the program. Edna found much pleasure in guiding the growth of so many children though it wasn't without its difficulties! At one time the children were weeding and Edna had hoped to sit and read the newspaper in the car, however the children had other plans for her in the garden with the weeds! Further still, Edna's fondness for heels proved difficult when on one occasion, after a picnic at Kings Park, they found themselves having to walk back to South Perth!

Edna's first job was at the tender age of fourteen working for the highly prestigious Silverbrook Tea Company to look after bookkeeping as well as to help with tasting the many blends of tea and give the managers her opinion. Edna says that, "You would have no idea about all the different flavours of tea!" To this day Edna has retained her fondness for good tea, preferably the leaves and not the bags! She then moved on to bookkeeping for a Perth leather goods company, "I love figures, and it was all



headwork back then!" proclaims Edna. She did such a good job that even when she was required by law to leave to get married they still asked her back every year to check the work of her replacement. When Harold died she went back to work at the Boans Department Store in Perth City. Edna worked on ninety counters over five years and she has said that, "I've cooked chickens, sold cakes, I've been on china and crystal. They put me on cutting cloth once and I thought, 'Oh good grief how am I going to cut all that!' I was on chickens for the hottest week of summer and there was no air-conditioning!" Boans was her last fulltime job until she was sacked in 1982 when the manager rang out of the blue to say, "We don't employ people your age." Edna remembers sitting like a zombie for the whole of the next day.

It was on the way back from New Zealand in the following year, that Edna met someone who told her about a job position at the Scripture Union Christian shop in the city. Edna followed their advice and found much enjoyment volunteering two days a week with all of the stocktaking and shop-keeping until it closed down in 1994. When it closed, one of the ladies found her a new job at the Baptist Technical College listening to and recording the tapes of sermons and so on. However, after a careless driver knocked her down on the road in South Perth with a callous, "Sorry I didn't see you," haemorrhaging was caused, which quickly spiralled into a medley of problems that resulted in an extreme deterioration of sight. It is this that has been one of Edna's biggest frustrations over the last twenty years.

"It all comes back to music!" declares Edna. And it really does seem to. Her son, Robin can't remember when she wasn't in a choir. It all started with her first solo performance of "Like a Wild Briar Rose" for the Sunday School Anniversary in Devon, when she was seven years old. She had a new dress for the occasion and actually won first place. She was presented with a medal and being the child she was, thought that of course hers was the best, as it had a pin on the back, unlike everybody else's! Subsequently Edna sang her first duet, "Father we thank thee for the wonderful days" with her friend Bill at Maylands Church, Perth. Edna loved to harmonize and generally preferred to sing Mezzo Soprano. She joined the Maylands church choir and sang with them every Sunday until she was married, as well as singing various solos. The Sandgate Methodist Church Choir was next, in addition to Madame Rosenthal's ladies choir and a

wonderful four years of singing tuition. It was at Sandgate Street that she conducted the children's choir. Edna didn't want all of their heads buried in choir books so she had the words printed on calico sheets in large letters and these were rolled up and down like blinds!

In the late 1940s or early 1950s Edna sang in the Perth Philharmonic Choir which rehearsed close to their home in South Perth. After that Edna conducted the Manning Church Choir for ten years. During this time ladies never went out without their hat and gloves and Edna was particularly fond of large hats. However she didn't want to wear her hat to church. She told everybody who asked that the congregation was too busy looking at her hat and not at the choir; thus the hat had to go. Quite a radical piece of reasoning!

Edna was asked three times if she would like to join the University Choir at Winthrop Hall but she was worried about Jan as she was too young to be left at home by herself. Finally, she accepted the audition saying, "If I don't do it now I never will!" Under the tutelage of the experienced choir master Professor Frank Calloway Edna learnt much. He was a perfectionist and one rehearsal they spent hours repeating the line, "Surely this was the Lamb of God" until they got it absolutely perfect! Edna feels that it was his expertise that really taught her to sing with a picture in her mind. In the mid 70's the Concert Hall was opened and this became one of their performance venues. When performing they had to wear smart black but unfortunately Jan thought that Edna, dressed in these choir blacks, looked like a black crow! After that it was the County Women's Association Choir where they even came first several years in the Scarborough Eisteddfod! Edna has loved music all of her life and now continues this passion with her collection of CDs and following programs on the ABC. It is also music through which Edna finds the true meaning of Christmas, Easter and her faith with "All those lovely requiems." At Easter St. Matthews Passion is what really calls Edna to celebrate and perhaps her favourite Christmas celebration is the Messiah. As she says, "That is what Christmas is for me." The University Choir sang this many years for their Christmas worship. Hymns such as "O Holy Night" and "The Little Drummer Boy" are also among Edna's favourites.



Over many Christmases Edna also helped UNICEF by selling cards at the Westpac Bank and for her, a good Christmas card must always have a dove on it. The family would celebrate Christmas by going to church then taking breakfast and presents afterwards. Presents were small thoughtful tokens such as a book as Edna read to the children every night. Enid Blyton was a firm favourite! They always had a large cooked dinner with chicken, surrounded by fat and the adored suet pudding!

Over the years, Edna has travelled extensively around the world. Her first big trip back to the Northern Hemisphere was in 1985 when she visited England, the European continent and Ireland. However her impressions of a wet Dublin weren't too favourable and she spent the whole day huddled in a bookshop! Her desire to witness the Passion play held at Oberammergau was realised on her European trip in 1990. The play is only performed once every ten years and it takes an entire day to enact. Hundreds of years ago there was a plague in Europe. The people of Oberammergau prayed and were saved and then put on a play to thank God. All actors must be Oberammergauian and only a virgin may play the role of Holy Mary. It was on this trip that Edna also realised her wish to witness the Edinburgh tattoo as well as stopping by England, France, Germany, Austria (where the coach drivers played songs from the Sound of Music!) and Italy. In Rome they visited the Catacombs and a terrified Edna was quick to remind the men on the tour, "Don't you leave me!" Edna also visited New Zealand in 1983 and loved it. She maintains that, "You must visit the North before the South because the South is just gorgeous, so green and beautiful with all of the white sheep!" She visited to partake in the Christian Endeavour Convention. However, what was much more fun was taking a tour with the kids! On tour she played the role of 'Mother' and the parish minister was the 'Father'! Her daughter Jan said, "This is my mother and father, but they're not married!" which created a bit of a laugh! Though she would have loved to travel more, there just wasn't the money to go to other places such as Canada, Norway and Sweden; you can tell Edna loves the cold!

As her beloved husband Harold died in 1974, Edna has been on her own for nearly the last 40 years. However she feels that in

those years she has been able to do many of the things she had wanted to do. Though Edna now resides in the Collier Park Nursing Home, Como, Western Australia, England still remains her home. She firmly believes that "You can take the girl out of England, but you can't take England out of the girl." She is a remarkable lady of great humour and strength who has made an enormous difference to so many lives. I thank her from my heart for letting me have the privilege to become her friend and listen to her wonderful stories.

God Bless

Autographs

"My friends have been my  
saviours."

## Lean Hard

Child of My love, lean hard,  
And let Me feel the pressure of thy care;  
I know thy burden, child, I shaped it;  
Poised it in Mine own hand; made no proportion  
In its weight to thine unaided strength,  
For even as I laid it on, I said,  
"I shall be near, and while she leans on Me,  
This burden shall be Mine, not hers:  
So shall I keep My child within the circling arms  
Of my own love." Here lay it down, nor fear  
To impose it on a shoulder which upholds  
The government of worlds. *Yet closer come;*  
*Thou art not near enough.* I would embrace thy care;  
So I might feel My child reposing on My breast,  
Thou lovest Me? I knew it. Doubt not then:  
But loving Me, lean hard.

By Frances Ridley Havergal