

ADELA LARDI – MOTHER SEBASTIAN O.B.E. 1877 – 1979

Adela Lardi was born 4th August 1877, seventh in a family of twelve children, her birthplace a store-come-home still stands next to the post office in the little town of Wandiligong in the Shire of Bright. Wandiligong an Aboriginal name meaning, 'The head of the river where the wattle blossoms bloom'.

Her father Carlo was Swiss Italian and changed his name to the English version being Charles, her mother Mary Tully migrated from Ireland at the age of three.

In the town of Wandiligong the family ran a general store and Charles also held a wine & spirits licence. It was a busy town as the gold diggings in the area attracted an increase in population. Much of the family's time was occupied in running the store so there was not such a great deal of outside social activity. Mother Sebastian described her early years as 'a quiet uneventful childhood' however being a large family they entertained themselves, they played cards in the evening & all the girls learnt music. The Lardi boys played in the local football team but as Mother Sebastian recalled women never attended these games nor did they attend funerals in those days.

All outings took place by horse & cart, it was a ten mile trip to attend Mass & Mother Sebastian lamented that she felt so sorry for the horse. One comment on her childhood was "We were not Irish Catholics, if we were sick on Sunday we didn't go to Mass we were from the European tradition".

As a young girl she attended the little state school No. 275 on the hill, her classmates nicknamed her "Boss" because of her strength of character, she always knew what she wanted and went after it. She was an avid reader, thrived on learning & often helped out with the younger grades.

In 1891 after winning a Government Scholarship, Adela left the valley a raw & lonely country girl to attend Star of the Sea as a boarder. Accompanied by her mother she made the long slow journey first to Wangaratta by horse & cart then on the steam train to Melbourne & Star of the Sea. She entered Star while Mother Byrne & Mother Fay were still actively running the school and later described them as truly great women of faith, cultured with a breadth of mind.

The school had fewer than 100 pupils the majority being boarders, many of the day pupils were brought to school each day in a horse drawn omnibus. Mother Sebastian found the first three months challenging however she made many friends & quickly settled into the life of a boarder of which she recalled eating meals in silence at dinner as the senior girls regaled us with 'rules of etiquette' from the Young Ladies Reader. These rules were learnt with the same vigour as the Ten Commandments. Leisure activities included swimming at the end of North Road or at the Middle Brighton Baths, playing base ball or tennis. There was no lack of playground space, where the school stands today there were vegetables gardens, cows & chickens all necessary to sustain the community.

On Ascension Thursday 27th May 1897, she entered the Presentation Congregation at Star of the Sea, receiving the religious name of Sister Sebastian. She received the habit on Presentation Day 21st November the same year. This was followed by her profession on the 10th January 1900.

In 1901 she was sent to Chiltern as a member of the new foundation & was recalled to Star of the Sea in 1908. She was a primary then a secondary teacher & obtained her M.A. with first class honours in 1920. She became Principal of Star of the Sea & later was superior of the Daylesford & Star communities.

Relinquishing the supervisorship in 1941 Mother Sebastian stayed on at Star in a teaching capacity until 1945 when she was elected Mother General of the Victorian congregation – a position held until 1958. That year saw the formation of this Society of the Presentation Sisters in Australia,

Mother Sebastian had been one of the leading figures in the formation of this Society & was elected First Mother President of the Order in the whole of Australia with a term of six years.

In 1972 Mother Sebastian was awarded the O.B.E. in the Queen's Birthday Honours for her outstanding services to education. On her 102nd birthday she was honoured once again when Councillor Bernadi, Lord Mayor of Melbourne, personally presented her with the Freedom of the City. *Note – Archives holds both of these awards.*

In her later years although physically ageing she proved she had lost none of her spirit by memorising passages from the Old & New Testament as she said "To keep myself from becoming a moron. I thank God he has left me with my intelligence so every now & then I take lectures on education." She lamented the demise of the three Rs saying "Education has changed over the years, in some ways for the better. It has branched out from its narrow path and taught children more about life, but it has neglected the fundamentals."

Mother Sebastian held the position of Principal twice, from 1919 - 1922 & then again from 1929 – 1934.

She spent her years of retirement in taking individual students for lessons in Latin, French & German. Throughout her life she was noted for her linguistic abilities & when well into her 90s she undertook a study of Indonesian in her spare time.

At 101 years of age she describes herself as a 'physical wreck' however she hit the headlines when in her fighting spirit she actively fought to save her beloved Wandiligong valley from subdivision development. The valley had initially been classified by The National Trust for preservation, she appealed & appeared at the Town Planning Appeals Tribunal, as she could not comprehend such a classification being violated. At 101, she was the oldest ex-resident at the Wandiligong Uniting church Centenary celebrations. She spoke from the pulpit of how her sisters & she would walk past the Wesleyan Church just to hear the music.

It was her very special interest in persons & things which kept her so mentally & physically alert. It is not surprising that for one who grew up in the natural beauty of Wandiligong that she continued her love of the outdoors & nature by being a keen gardener.

Mother Sebastian saw out her retirement here at Star & was involved in the planning of the new building to be named in her honour. She continued her love of learning & was often seen pottering in the garden.

At the grand old age of 102, Mother Sebastian died peacefully here at Star of the Sea on the 15th October 1979. She was an exceptionally talented woman whose modest, dedication & warmth made her much loved by all who were associated with her.