

# MT ST BERNARD COLLEGE 1921-2021: A CENTENARY OF STORIES

Dr. Peter Webb

*June 2021*



Schools, even those 100 years old like Mt St Bernard College, live in a context; in this case, it is the rich Indigenous pre-history of Far North Queensland, the beautiful rainforests and the inescapable mining history, including for gold and tin. The pre-history of these rainforest areas, from which many Mt St Bernard College students have come for 100 years, is well-told in a 2015 book by Asa Ferrier, *Journeys into the Rainforest*.<sup>1</sup> There is a description of the Djirubal peoples' reliance on the rainforest trees for food and shelter; the nupa tree

provided bark for water vessels and carry bags, rope, shelters and blankets; larvae grew in the tree and hatched into food grubs and the native bees provided honey and wax to strengthen string.<sup>2</sup>

The loss of rainforest habitat and traditional hunting and gathering grounds with European settlements and farming meant the Aboriginal people were starving, and cold. There is a photograph in Ferrier's book of the Protector of Aboriginal people at the annual handing out of blankets to their designated leader.<sup>3</sup>

The Herberton Mining Museum, on the site of the former Great Northern Mine, includes a map of Cape York showing 19 separate tribal groupings in the area around Cairns. In addition, James Cook University academic Robert Dixon has published a three-volume collection of documents of Djirubal language<sup>4</sup> and a thesaurus and further information on the Djirubal people can be found in the work of Tindale.<sup>5</sup>

A new book by Paul Dillon, *The Irvinebank Massacre*, published in March 2021, describes the murder of four Aboriginal people at this mining town near Herberton.<sup>6</sup> Lynley Wallis writes: "(They) were murdered by a detachment of troopers from the Native Mounted Police (NMP) on 18 October 1884". This event is particularly unusual for three reasons:

- it is one of the few instances that was relatively thoroughly investigated at the time, mostly due to agitation by local mining magnate John Moffat;
- it is the only known instance where Aboriginal troops of the NMP were charged for such a killing; and,
- there is an historic map pinpointing the massacre location, from which archaeological evidence was recovered in 1996.<sup>7</sup>

Of course, Herberton itself is not rainforest country; it is granite, like the area around Stanthorpe in southern Queensland, both tin country, and the Herberton climate is quite different from much of the surrounding region.

The story goes that when the College, officially opened on 21 September 1921, set about surveying an oval on higher ground above the campus, an unexpected challenge arose. There was tin there! This was unsurprising: Tin Town, one of the early nicknames for Herberton – most likely named for Robert Herbert, first Premier of Queensland – produced vast quantities of the metal since the first discovery of payable tin mineralization, on 19 April 1880. “You’ll have to take out a Miner’s Right, Sisters”, the bursar of the time, Sr. Catherine Coyne, was told. The story got better, because according to Sr. Faye Kelly, a number of the Sisters actually did go out under cover of darkness and peg out a claim! Local resident

Frank Sims told the story this way: a group of fathers of students at the College camped out overnight to prevent counter claims and the next morning the Sisters' Miners Right was registered. One imagines students and Sisters of Mercy in after school recreation time with panning dishes and pickaxes extracting the precious metal, perhaps indeed to guarantee the future funds of the College. In the end, payable quantities were not predicted, there was no digging by Sisters and students, and the oval was built.

Near the oval are the graves of Sisters of Mercy who staffed Mt St Bernard College in the early days. Many of them came from Dungarvan in Ireland and they moved to Herberton from their foundation in Cooktown. At a ceremony in Cooktown Cemetery, on 24 June 2008, commemorating 120 years of Mercy ministry, an honour roll of 90 Sisters listed seven who were buried in Cooktown, 32 in Herberton, 47 in Cairns, three in Mareeba and one in Sydney. So recalls Margery Tilden, a Mt St Bernard boarding student and later a member of the Sisters community for a time. She also recalled 120 Sisters gathering from around the Cairns diocese at Herberton at Christmas time.<sup>8</sup>

The story of how the Sisters came to be in Herberton is told succinctly by historian Sr. Mary Rosa McGinley, PBVM in her 2002 book, *A Dynamic of Hope: Institutes of Women Religious in Australia*:

The Vicariate of North Queensland, with Cooktown as its Centre, was established in 1877. The following year John Cani, Bishop Quinn's former Vicar-general in Brisbane, was appointed Pro-Vicar Apostolic. He tried unsuccessfully to obtain Sisters of Mercy and Josephite Sisters. Of the very large group of Sisters of Mercy recruited in Ireland by Mother Bridget Conlan in 1879-80, Bishop Quinn had arranged for six to go to the Vicariate, a promise he was unable to fulfil with the complete Josephite withdrawal from Queensland at that time. With Cani's appointment as first Bishop of Rockhampton, he was replaced as Pro-Vicar Apostolic by Monsignor Paul Fortini, who arrived from Rome in 1882. Fortini, aware of the need for women religious to consolidate apostolic work in a mission he found difficult, gathered several local girls into a community in Cooktown; known as "green nuns" - from the colour of their dress. With Fortini's growing unpopularity among the local people, they soon abandoned the project. His next venture was the 1884 Sisters of Mercy foundation under Sr. M. Vincent Mulhall. In that year, however, the Vicariate was entrusted to the Irish Augustinian province, with John Hutchinson appointed Pro-Vicar. Hutchinson, considering Vincent Mulhall's credentials suspect, dismissed her, but at the same time began to seek a replacement Mercy

community in Ireland. It was not until a home visit in 1887 that he was able to obtain Sisters from Dungarvan. The Superior, Mother M. de Sales Meagher, volunteered, together with the rest of the community. With four companions, she accompanied the Bishop on his return the following year. These sisters in the years ahead were to receive strong support in the frequently trying conditions from their Augustinian co-workers.

The party was welcomed by all sections of the heterogeneous population of Cooktown, which at the same time was a busy port for the rich Palmer goldfield. Beginning both teaching and visitation in temporary accommodation, the community was provided in 1889 with a substantial brick building to house Sisters and boarders and to provide classrooms. With an ambitious building for the time and place, in keeping with several others erected around the same years, this essentially functional structure soon proved inadequate. Further small groups of professed Sisters from Dungarvan and several Irish girls offering to enter in Cooktown came in 1892, 1893 and 1897, with the first Australian girl joining the community in 1899. There were six further postulants from Ireland in 1904. To supply needed extra accommodation, the attic space between the

ceiling and iron roof was converted into sleeping quarters for the novices and the community living room, with this improvised “third floor” being reached by a narrow spiral staircase. In 1908, seven further entrants arrived from Ireland.<sup>9</sup>

One account says that the Sisters had only one prayer, with the heat and humidity, “Lord, send us a breeze!”<sup>10</sup>

MacGinley continues:

In 1893, a convent was established in Cairns with the community staffing, as in Cooktown, the parish primary school and their own convent high school (St Monica’s). In both towns, the level of religious practice markedly improved. In 1909, a branch house was established in Mareeba where there was no resident priest for another four years and, in 1910, in Herberton on the Atherton Tableland. [*The train had reached Herberton from Atherton and further away, Cairns, in October 1910.*] In 1919, with the irreversible decline of (the gold supplies in) Cooktown and the need for a more adequate mother house and novitiate, the administration of the congregation was transferred to Herberton, where construction on the present convent and school complex of Mt St Bernard’s was begun. The majority of boarders followed in 1921.



*The men who built the original convent and school building in 1921, including Fr. Bernard Patrick Doyle, an Augustinian priest, whose great dream it was to build the school.*

In fact, the College is named after Fr. Doyle, who had come from Ireland in 1906. It was his idea to establish a boarding school on this part of the Atherton Tablelands. Fr. Doyle had a dream of one day establishing a boarding school in his parish and many times discussed his idea with the Sisters.

Actually, 2010 marked the century of Catholic Education in Herberton. Having already founded St Patrick's Catholic Primary School in 1910, the Sisters of Mercy established Mount St Bernard College in 1921 as a boarding college for both primary and secondary students. The main priority of the college was to meet the educational needs of students from the Tablelands and remoter areas of the Far North and North-West of Queensland. The students who lived as boarders at Mt St Bernard College now included Indigenous students who



had come from many communities in Far North Queensland and the Torres Strait.

Mt St Bernard College is a member of several communities: the town of Herberton, named for being at the head waters of the Herbert River with its links to tin mining, and the oldest town in the region of the Atherton Tablelands; the larger community of Far North Queensland, and its gold and other mineral histories, with Cairns as its major Centre; the communities of the Torres Strait, where the Sisters of Mercy also established schools, together with Papua New Guinea and Northern Territory where Mt St Bernard students have also come from.<sup>11</sup>

The foundation stone of Mt St Bernard College was laid on 11 January 1920 and the College was officially opened on 21 September 1921.

In its first year of operation some of the 46 boarders were primary school students who attended St Patrick's School while the remainder were secondary students and were taught in Mt St Bernard College. The care of thousands of boarding students by the Sisters of Mercy and later with lay helpers is an enormous part of the story of Mt St Bernard College.

In terms of the Irish contribution, emigration records show that from 1838 to 1918, approximately 14,000 women either became nuns in Australia or arrived in Australia as Sisters in over 50 religious orders or

congregations and that 2,900 of them were Irish.<sup>12</sup> Mary MacKillop also was a guest of the Sisters of Mercy in Dungarvan as she sought new members for her Sisters of St Joseph. There's a beautiful story about Sister Mary Berchmans, who was 103 when I met her in Herberton in 1993. She was among a group of Irish teenagers who were met on their arrival in Sydney by boat by Mary MacKillop and who stayed with her and her Sisters in North Sydney. Mary Berchmans recalled that Mary MacKillop had said to the group, presciently as it turned out, "You will all persevere". And all of them did remain Sisters.



*Sr. M. Berchmans (aged 100), Sr. Margaret Rush - 1991*

There's a further MacKillop connection in Herberton too: the visit in 1881 to the tin mines in far North Queensland of Mary MacKillop's co-founder, Father Julian Tenison Woods, whom Father Frank Tenison Brennan, SJ describes as "the peripatetic priest scientist who always

combined scientific inquiry with sacramental service in the most remote parts of the country".<sup>13</sup> The St Patrick's Church building, blessed and opened on St Patrick's Day 1889, and the oldest in the Diocese of Cairns, was restored by a team led by Augustinian priest, Father Peter Hayes, OSA beginning in 1994; an historical pageant held in the refurbished Church on 18 March 1995 included Tenison Woods.

Recently I met Fr. Peter Hayes, now 88, and also his cousin Margery Tilden, who was a student at Mt St Bernard from age 7, later did her nursing training with the Little Company of Mary sisters at Calvary Hospital in Cairns, became a member of the Sisters of Mercy at Herberton for several years where she taught music, and later married and has three adult children.<sup>14</sup>

This same St Patrick's Church features in a story on the *Cairns Post* of Saturday 20 January 1951, reporting an event three days earlier in the Church, which is in the same grounds as Mt St Bernard College.<sup>15</sup> The story is interesting also for its mention of the other orders of Sisters in Cairns diocese, the Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception, the Sisters of the Good Samaritan, and those of the Little Company of Mary, two of whom were there to begin the foundation of their hospital in Cairns, of the local priest who was a member of the Augustinian order which served in the diocese for many years and of the presence of the local Shire Chairman, Mr Cecil Holdcroft, at this public ceremony.

The Holdcrofts were parishioners at St Patrick's for many years and their grandchildren attended Mt St Bernard College. The story reads as follows:

## **RELIGIOUS RECEPTION**

### **CEREMONY AT HERBERTON**

**Herberton, Jan. 17** - Glorious pageantry allied to deep spiritual conviction made the ceremony of religious reception at Herberton yesterday one which will be long remembered. The reception took place at St. Patrick's Church, (and) Convent of Our Lady of Mercy, Mount St Bernard.

In the morning, Sister M. Consul Wallwork, daughter of Mr. W. Wallwork, Edmonton, and Sister Rosaria Russell, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. C. Russell, Cairns, made their final vows in the presence of Most Rev. T. V. Cahill D.D., Bishop of Cairns; the clergy of the diocese, the Herberton community and a large gathering of friends and relatives. At 7 a.m., the procession of religious set out from the convent to St. Patrick's Church, Herberton, where, during the Mass of the Holy Ghost, the solemn profession took place. At 3 p.m., friends and relatives from all over the district gathered to see the religious again proceed in procession for the impressive ceremony of the clothing of the 19 postulants who received the Holy Habit of Religion and took the White Veil.

Seventeen of the postulants came to Queensland from Ireland just a year ago, while two were members of well-known local families.

The 19 young ladies appeared first in exquisite white bridal attire. Each carried a bouquet of fresh white flowers and a lighted candle and was attended by a tiny train bearer. These children were pupils from the convent schools of the diocese of Cairns. The postulants made a beautiful picture as they entered the flower adorned church where white arum lilies were massed on the high altar and trails of sweet scented frangipani and bullrushes were arranged around the walls. After the first part of the ceremony, the postulants changed into the sober habits of the Order of the Sisters of Mercy.

The following Australian postulants received the Holy Habit of Religion: Miss Ines Demartini, Ingham (Sister M. Sylvester), Miss Berenice Geraghty, Julatten (Sister M. Veronica) ...

The story then names the 17 Irish women and their Irish home towns, including Miss Maureen Freyne, Ballyhaunis, Sister Mary Jude, who was later my wife Christine's much-loved Zoology teacher at Mt St Bernard, and Sister Margaret Rush, Kildare, Sister Mary Matthew, who was the Superior of the Sisters at the time when I was appointed Principal in 1993.

The story continued:

The Bishop congratulated the Sisters and reminded them that it was just a year ago that 17 of them had arrived from Ireland. He continued, "We should be grateful to the Sisters of Mercy, Dungarvan, who sent the first five sisters to the diocese of Cairns in 1888. Though the last of these pioneer Sisters, Mother M. Evangelist Morrissey, went to her eternal reward only last Easter Monday, yet their spirit continues and will continue while the Sisters of Mercy are in Australia.

He went on to state that, not only did the people owe a debt of gratitude to these Sisters who gave themselves for the education of Australian children, but, to their parents also, parents who gave their daughters proudly and willingly to God's service ...

Dr. Cahill concluded with renewed expressions of gratitude and congratulations, expressing the hope that the example of the Irish Sisters would inspire the hearts of our Australian girls to a greater love of God and a desire to consecrate themselves to His service.

A number of artistically iced cakes, made in the fashion of bride cakes, were presented to the postulants by friends and relatives. Twenty priests from, the parishes of the diocese attended the ceremony and 130 sisters attended, including all

the Sisters of Mercy in the diocese, After the ceremony, a reception was given in the Convent Hall by the Sisters, ably assisted by the ladies of the parish. Rev. Father Keane, O.S.A., P.P., and the chairman of the Shire Council (Mr. C. Holdcroft), welcomed His Lordship back from his extensive travel overseas and congratulated the Sisters on their happy day. Delicious afternoon tea was served.

This account from 70 years ago emphasizes that it makes no sense to describe Mt St Bernard College as other than a supreme exercise in the expression of faith. How else could it have survived and thrived to its centenary? The Sisters of Mercy today describe their mission in this way:

The Sisters of Mercy in the Cairns Diocese...(are) part of a continuing development of Mercy proclaiming the Gospel through the vision of Venerable Catherine McAuley ... Whatever and wherever our ministry is, we are part of the one mercy mission, part of the ongoing mission of the compassionate Jesus.<sup>16</sup>

This mission has included the travelling Religious Education work of the Motor Mission, staffed by Sisters Rovena Duffy and Anne Moule among others; Sr. Anne, who also has served as Head of Boarding and Principal, and Sister Christina Randle, also worked in Papua New Guinea. Sr. Kay O'Neill works with refugees and asylum

seekers: a 2019 podcast records a conversation with Sister Kay and Sr. Meredith Evans about this work.<sup>17</sup> Visitation in the town of Herberton by Sister Mary McHugh, known universally as “Barty”, together with her work with staff of the kitchen and laundry at Mt St Bernard with local residents who worked there, made her known and loved. When the College library was named the Murray-McHugh Resource Centre after Sr. Barty and Sr. Pam Murray whose mission of music touched thousands of students, this memorialized the contributions of these two women.<sup>18</sup>



*Sr Pam Murray (left) and Sr Mary McHugh (“Barty”) with students at the opening of the Murray-McHugh Resource Centre*

The *Cairns Post* of 17 April 2019 carried this story:

How Far North Became Home for Sister of Mercy:  
Sister Mary McHugh, who spent 69 of her 88 years



as a Sister of Mercy at Herberton, where she was fondly known as Sister Barty, was the eldest of three children born to Catherine and William McHugh in Kiltimagh, County Mayo. Sister Mary McHugh (born in December 1930 — and died March 2019) always offered care for those in need.<sup>19</sup>

Interestingly, the earlier 1951 *Cairns Post* story about the Sisters' religious profession, mentions Sr. Margaret Rush and also Sr. Mary Wallwork, daughter of Mr. W. Wallwork, Edmonton, who recounted her memoirs of the war years at MSB. She was a Mt St Bernard student prior to entering the Sisters. The following precious memoir of Sr. Mary Wallwork was recorded by Sr. Bridget Murray.<sup>20</sup>

During the War there were many Armed Forces personnel and Depots around the Tableland and the Americans 503 Parachute Regiment was in Herberton during 1941 / 1942. Excerpts from Sr. Mary of Mercy Wallworks's wartime reminiscences mention bombers, black-out paper, air-raid sirens, trenches, eighty children transferred from Cairns, troop trains, three-part choirs at Masses for the American soldiers and all the hymns were sung in Latin, 8.30 am daily in St Patrick's Church students' Rosary to Our Lady Help of Christians and singing the hymn "Mary help our valiant soldiers", together with the soldiers coming on Sunday afternoons to Benediction in St. Patrick's Church.

Sr. Mary remembered the Stations of the Cross Good Friday:

The singing of the "Stabat Mater" going from Station to Station will always remain with me: hundreds of soldiers in their "swaying suits of green".

She continued:

Christ the King procession, which ended the Forty Hours devotion, was a sight to be seen. The soldiers, most of them Americans, were kneeling everywhere, across the road and down Penance Hill while the guard of honour stretched from in front of the Church, down to the Convent gate and up to the front steps where Benediction was given.

Another event was the troops' breakfast. That morning the chefs took over the Convent kitchen. I put my head in for something pretty early, and was amazed to see the top of the Aga stove cleaned down and toast cooking on it. That's the way they worked. We watched the men carry bacon and eggs down to the school (which is now the Concert Hall). Over their shoulders were bags; I suppose they were to help carry the hot bacon and eggs. They went backwards and forwards from kitchen to school.

We went to the Wondecla showgrounds for the visit of General McArthur who inspected the troops in North Queensland - both American and Australian.

Then there was the September Concert. Fr. Larkin arranged for the soldiers from Wondecla to attend the concert. The men arrived in their Army trucks that night. Sr. M. Enda Mansfield prepared special items, and pianos and violins were played too. The little boys did the "War Dance" while the choir sang "March Militaire". When the two smallest boys came on stage with their little drums and took up positions on either side at the wings, there was an uproar from the men. Next day, four chaplains, including Fr. Gallagher and Fr. Glover, came from Wondecla to hear the violins play. I came in from the sports field with the two Reynolds girls, Eva Ganora and Joan Long, the pianist, and we entertained the chaplains for an hour or so. (These three violinists had all passed their A Mus A and Joyce was preparing for her Licentiate so they were well worth hearing). At the Concert, in between every item, they came down and played, without music, in front of the stage. They were glorious.

The boarders' retreat was given by Fr. Power, an American, who was chaplain to the paratroopers. The paratroopers were stationed in Gordonvale

and each morning they practised their "drops" on Green Hills ...

There was confusion as we headed for the trenches outside the Presbytery. When I arrived Fr. Coyne was there with a very long stick. He was marshalling us so we could all fit in the trench. He said, "Now, keep your heads down and start the Rosary because the Japs are over Atherton". That put the fear of God into us, but we had said only a few Hail Marys when the "all clear" rang out, much to everyone's relief. Fr. Meagher had managed to get all but one of the Sisters out too, on the other side. Sr. M Benedict, the Sister in charge of the kitchen, wouldn't leave her cakes because she said they would be spoiled in the oven!

... On 15th August 1945, we were preparing to go for the usual picnic about 8:30am when St Mary's (the Anglican girls' school in Herberton) bell rang out. St Patrick's bell joined in, then the Convent, then the school bells, then the sirens at the tin battery and we heard the hooting of trucks and the horns of cars. The war was over! We all went to the Church to thank God. We had a delightful day out at Forrester's Flats. After a few days the troop trains and trucks had all gone. We were left behind with the American's left-overs which they weren't supposed to give us. We had Weetbix for breakfast

for the rest of that school year. Life returned to normal.

So concludes Sr. Mary Wallwork's memoir.



*Tiny Tot Boarders, 1951*

A number of boys, around 20, were evacuated to Herberton from Cairns. Danella Culloty has written about her grandmother's care for these boys:

I tried for quite a while to contact Dr John Casey. Eventually he did ring and we had a couple of interesting chats. He clearly remembered the house and had fond memories of Mrs Culloty looking after them. John Casey was then in his late 80s and he could only recall a few names of boys who were there during his time in 1942. He only ever knew Mrs Culloty and remembers how kind and caring she was to each of the boys.<sup>21</sup>

John Casey's letter of gratitude was printed in the Brisbane Catholic Leader on 23 December 2018. Dr Casey, who was seven when evacuated from Gordonvale with his five-year-old brother for fear of Japanese

invasion following Pearl Harbour, wrote of his gratitude to Mrs Culloty and to “the Sisters of Mercy (who) provided for two little boys a place of safety and comfort in a boarding school meant for the education of girls”.<sup>22</sup> The Mt St Bernard 75th Anniversary booklet (1996)<sup>23</sup> includes the names of these boys. “All meals were provided by the Nuns and the boys were given beds, baths and haircuts by Mrs Culloty and then Mrs Shannon at the house across the road from the Convent /Girls Boarding School.”<sup>24</sup> Prior to Mrs Culloty, Matron Murphy from Herberton Hospital was the House Mother for the boys’ residence.

Dr Casey’s letter to The Catholic Leader was prompted by an article in The Catholic Leader two weeks earlier: “Herberton honours a history of Mercy”.<sup>25</sup> The article, based on a report by Sr. Rovena Duffy, notes that at that time there were 19 Sisters of Mercy ministering in the Diocese of Cairns, that St Patrick’s primary school closed in 1977 and that Mt St Bernard College “was well known for its excellence in all areas of education particularly music, the teaching of which helped the sisters earn their living and expand the school”.

The College’s 75th anniversary booklet also includes memoirs of Mrs Culloty’s care in this period by Joan Carbone (from the recollections of Sr. Madeleine and Stan Carswell) and by Kathleen Andrews (née Britton). Joan Carbone notes that boarder Katie Dodd from Kuranda was the daughter of the famous butterfly man Frederick

Parkhurst Dodd, who used to send butterflies all over the world. Joan Carbone also notes that:

When the boys reached Grade 4 / Secondary level, they attended either St Augustine's College in Cairns or Mt Carmel College in Charters Towers. As there were no facilities for the boys, only girls were admitted to the secondary boarding school at MSB. The building was later moved to Ravenshoe where it became the Convent for a time, near St Therese's school and church grounds in Ravenshoe.

I can remember another Herberton legend, Darcy Camp who by the 1990s was making his deliveries to the College and elsewhere not by horse and cart but by a vintage truck. Apparently also, he would bring boarders' luggage up to the College in the days when the train was running. Darby Camp's truck is now on permanent display next to the Herberton Historical Village; its last run was as the hearse at Darby's funeral.

The year 2006 was a significant one for the Sisters of Mercy. The College website notes that:

In 2006, the Sisters of Mercy gifted Mount St Bernard College to the Catholic Diocese of Cairns. MSB is now under the stewardship of the Cairns Diocese's Catholic Education Services and the Mercy charisms of service, faith, hospitality and

social justice continue to be nurtured and lived out by a dedicated and professional staff.<sup>26</sup>

Mt St Bernard College was part of my wife Christine McNeill's life: she was there with her sisters Frances, Moira and Carmel, including for the College's 50th anniversary in 1971. Their younger siblings attended Herberton State School.

There is a photo on the College Centenary website of she and her classmates in their checked sports dresses in Year 12 Zoology class (using the University of Queensland first year Science curriculum) with her favourite, utterly engaging, teacher, Sister Jude, dissecting a rat. She recalls being wonderstruck with Sister Jude's teaching and demonstration, through the microscope, of the marvellous order of a cockroach.

The McNeill's were day students mostly, since their dad Henry was Herberton's Clerk of the Court. Christine remembers working in the College kitchens on holidays, preparing food, including the famous pink lamingtons, for the large gathering of Sisters of Mercy who gathered in the Mother House at Herberton from all over Cairns diocese for their annual retreat. She remembers too an ambitious outdoor display, with many rehearsals, for the 50th celebrations in 1971.

The Mercy charism, like the charisms of other religious orders of women and men, is an elaboration of the Baptism call, which continues to inspire the women and



men who work in Catholic education. This is surely the only way to make sense of the sacrifice of one's life to education and compassionate service and to supporting the work of education in Catholic schools, including through the enormous commitment to caring for children from remote locations in boarding schools.

Students' recollections from the 1970s include these of Janelle Casey and her sister Shireen who were boarders from Tully. Parents used to charter a bus to bring the children home for their free weekends to the Tully area. Janelle, 1975-1979, recalls the polished floors which required the emptying of pots into a sheet to carry clothes upstairs.<sup>27</sup> She remembers boarding students from the Tablelands area, the Torres Strait and Coen and Sister Margaret McGrath, the principal, describing Sr. Margaret as "a clever person". There are tales of a few boarders making midnight visits to the kitchen and "never being caught". Janelle credits Sr. Anne Moule with her desire to become a teacher; Sr. Anne's commitment to Mt St Bernard College is acknowledged in the Sr. Anne Moule Principal's General Excellence Scholarship to students entering Year 11. Janelle Casey later completed a Masters in Special Education and works in this field at a primary school in Cairns. She shares this profession with another Mt St Bernard graduate, Professor Loretta Giorcelli, author of the 2017 book, *Quality Schools: Inclusive Practices*.<sup>28</sup> Marian Clabrough attended St Patrick's Primary School and the College in the 1960s and 70s as a

day student with her siblings; her mother Margaret Healy was later a teacher and Deputy Principal at the College. Some of Marian's memories include:

At that time Herberton was the retirement place for sisters of Mercy in the Cairns diocese and the area was called Lourdes. I was a speech and drama student and a couple of times a year we would go to some of the sisters in the nursing home to recite our pieces. This was good practice for us and I hope welcomed by the sisters.

Before the big sports field was built, the sports day would take place on the Wondecla oval. Local people with trucks would ferry all the girls in the back of the truck to and from the oval. These trucks would all be decorated with the colours of each house: Patrick's, green; Joseph's, red; Augustine's, purple and Bernard's, blue. It was very exciting for all of us to ride in the back of these trucks and something that could not happen today.

In the early days, the school speech night was held in the town hall and the local towns people would come along to see the performance.

One of my early memories is of the whole school crowding into the study hall in the convent and watching Neil Armstrong walk on the moon. I don't think the reception was that great but we

were all aware of the significance of the event. I am grateful that the sisters were willing to pull us all out of class to witness the event.

While I was in grades 11 and 12 a new building was being built beside the main classroom building. This was a great time for us girls as there were lots of young carpenters working on the building. Not sure it was good for our concentration on school work!

When I first was in high school the bell would be rung at midday every day and we would stop what we were doing to say the Angelus. All classes were started with 'Good Morning Sister and God bless you' in a singsong voice followed by a prayer before class started.

One day when I was in primary school there was a big kerfuffle as a snake was spotted on the lower field. We day students used to have our lunch in a small shed there. Poor Father Crane, as one of the few men on site, was called over from the presbytery to deal with this. Looking back now, I don't think he was really equipped for this but valiantly heaved bricks at it till it was no longer a threat. It caused great excitement through the whole school.

I remember when singing the school song there was a part when the whole choir lent forward and

bowed to the audience. It was always a bit scary as I always felt I could lose my balance and cause the whole choir to tumble over. This never happened in the whole time I was there and it did look spectacular from the audience viewpoint. I am not sure if the school song is still sung in this way.

The uniform when I was in primary was the red check of the Cairns diocese and then we changed over to the white shirt and grey pleated skirt. The fabric of the grey skirts was quite heavy and very prickly when the weather was hot. The uniform changed shortly after I left to a plain blue skirt of a different fabric. We wore our ties and school badges for special occasions.<sup>29</sup>

In 1993, Christine and our young family moved to Herberton following my appointment as Principal at Mt St Bernard College, following 72 years of leadership by Sisters of Mercy as principals. Our youngest, Michael, was born in Atherton Hospital while we were there and our three daughters attended St Joseph's Atherton in their red-checked dresses, to disguise the red dirt of the Tablelands, perhaps, we thought. Agnes and May Gibson, Christine's aunts, were essential family support, along with my brother Gerard and his wife Carolyn in Cairns. During this period, the College Board approved the re-introduction of boy students as part of a renewed promotion of the College as serving the Tablelands community and beyond, not only as a boarding school for

girls but also as a regional co-educational Catholic high school. In the first year of co-education, there were 10 boys: the other students at the time said about the one boy in Year 10, “we adopted him as an honorary girl.”

When we lived in Herberton, we attended Mass at St Patrick’s in the school grounds; it was during that time that the church was beautifully restored, plank by plank, by a team led by Augustinian priest Fr. Peter Hayes, OSA, now living in Coorparoo in Brisbane. In terms of further research, the College website has a large collection of historical material and student memories and photographs and it is to be hoped these are made available on an ongoing basis. The Sisters of Mercy archives are now located in Sydney.

Many people, students, staff and parents have made a contribution to Mt St Bernard College. I recall for example the joy on the faces of the 1994 Rock Eisteddfod students, with their gifted choreographer Fiona Hamill among other staff and parent helpers, as they came out into the foyer of the Cairns Cultural Centre after being awarded the title of Regional winners for their “Great Barrier Reef Spawning” original performance, proving the worth of the contest’s promise of “a natural high”. The College won the Rock Eisteddfod again in 1996. I recall meeting the Mt St Bernard Rugby League boys at the Confraternity Rugby League Carnival in 2017 when their Papua New Guinea captain led them in kneeling in prayer at the beginning and end of the game. Mr David Finch,

who was Principal from 2015-18, with the support of the Sisters of Mercy opened historic rooms and artefacts of the original building for viewing and also celebrated the Indigenous culture of many of the students with the Didge Kids Tour in 2016. The *Cairns Post* carried this story in 2016:

Formed about two years ago, Didge Kids is a mix of Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and non-indigenous students, and is spearheaded by parent and musician, Mark Lane. “It’s all about learning about each other’s cultures and having the opportunity to be able to celebrate their music,” Mr Finch said: “One of the big things I’ve been pushing for is for the kids to be more open and confident displaying their talent in music and dance.”<sup>30</sup>

For 100 years, MSB music and concerts have had an outstanding history.

Earlier, Mr Luke Reed served for five years as Principal, 2008-2012, which included major building improvements, including for boarding facilities. Br. Bill Tynan, a Christian Brother, followed Mr Luke Reed as principal from 2012-14 and was able to access additional government funds for the College, create smaller classes and through the generosity of the Sisters, provide enhanced teaching spaces, as well as make frequent visits to the remote communities from which Mt St Bernard

students come. Boys' boarding facilities were also established, initially at the former Uniting Church campus of Woodleigh College, across the road from Mt St Bernard College. By the way, Mt St Bernard College is on the street called Broadway so College residents, and my family and I when we lived in Herberton, lived "on Broadway"!

In preparing this talk, I have interviewed or corresponded with many people with Mt St Bernard connections: Sisters of Mercy, former principals, staff members, and students. I have studied the material on the College website and consulted more widely as the references indicate.



*Maurine Robson, née Carney, boarder 1921, and great-granddaughter Michelle Graham, Atherton, Year 8 1994*

There is a video invitation from Sr. Irene Masterson on the Centenary College website, to which many past students have responded, to contribute to “One Hundred Years of Yarns”. The website and its history documents refer to a number of significant dates and people in MSB’s 100 years. Sr. Irene Masterson, along with her sisters Therese and Marie, became members of the Sisters of Mercy in Cairns diocese and with Herberton as their Mother House. Sister Irene wrote:

Hello all you wonderful people who carry fond memories of Mt St Bernard College. I am Sister Irene Masterson. I have been invited on behalf of the Sisters of Mercy to invite you to share your yarns. This is my reflection. Mt St Bernard College Herberton 2021, now populated by young men and women of many different national backgrounds, is a very different place from the one I knew as a student from 1956 to 59 and the next two years and a half on the other side of the wall as a novice, beginning my studies and life as a Sister of Mercy. But then my brief six years was vastly different to those of the foundation time a hundred years ago when my aunt, Doreen Grogan (née May), was a boarder there. A comparison of the uniforms is enough to remind us that there was an evolving story which enriched the northern part of Australia and beyond.



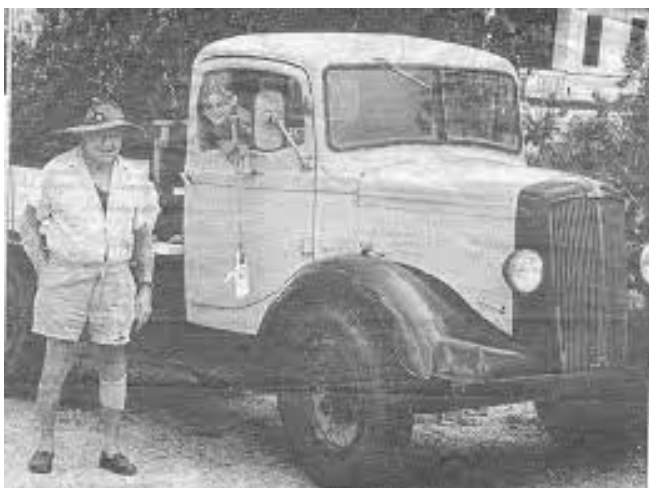
The subjects taught and the uniforms worn, and the discipline, adapted down through the years but still Mt St Bernard College shines as a beacon light (note: the College motto is “Let your Light Shine”). What is the energy behind that light? I believe it is the same force, the same energy, the same love which empowered Catherine McAuley to use the fortune left to her by her patron William Callaghan. And that is the power of love which Catherine expressed as ‘Mercy’.

Celebrating the past together we look forward to the future. We invite you to tell your story in this space so that we have a hundred years of yarns. May our stories celebrate the past and enrich the future. God bless you.<sup>31</sup>

I recall as Principal conducting enrolment interviews, after the parents of the prospective students, and the students themselves, had expressed their desires and expectation of their forthcoming times at the College. I would ask, “You’ve explained what you would like to draw from the well here at MSB. What will you put into the well so that it doesn’t run dry? And, I would add, I don’t mean money”.

People have put into the well at Mt St Bernard College for a hundred years: parents and guardians, Sisters of Mercy, teachers, staff members including boarding supervisors and kitchen staff, loyal business managers, school

secretaries and deputy principals, teachers and nurses including Agnes and May Gibson, priests and parish members, townspeople and tradespeople including the famous Darby Camp and his heritage delivery truck. The well has not run dry and it continues to nurture in lifegiving ways the people and communities of Far North Queensland and beyond.



*Darby Camp and his delivery truck*

- 
- <sup>1</sup> Ferrier, A., *Journeys into the Rainforest (Terra Australis 43): Archaeology of Culture Change and Continuity on the Evelyn Tableland, North Queensland*, (ANU Press, 2015 - Social Science).
- <sup>2</sup> Ferrier, *Journeys into the Rainforest*, p.52.
- <sup>3</sup> Ferrier, *Journeys into the Rainforest*, p.46.
- <sup>4</sup> Dixon, R., *The Dyirbal language of North Queensland*, James Cook University. Language and Culture Research Centre, 2017.
- <sup>5</sup> Tindale, N., "Djirubal (QLD)". *Aboriginal Tribes of Australia: Their Terrain, Environmental Controls, Distribution, Limits, and Proper Names*, Australian National University Press, 2017.
- <sup>6</sup> Dillon, P., *The Irvinebank Massacre*, Cleveland, Qld, Connor Court Publishing, 2021.
- <sup>7</sup> Wallis, L. and Nichols, W., *The NMP and the murder of Aboriginal people at Irvinebank in 1884*, Archaeology on the Frontier, 2019,  
<https://archaeologyonthefrontier.com/2019/08/25/irvinebank/>
- <sup>8</sup> Margery Tilden and Father Peter Hayes, OSA, 15 May 2021, Interview with author, Villanova College, Coorparoo.
- <sup>9</sup> MacGinley, M.R., *A dynamic of hope: institutes of women religious in Australia*, Sydney, Crossing Press, 2002, pp.232-3.
- <sup>10</sup> Sr Rovena Duffy rsm, *Lord, send us a breeze!*, 2015,  
<https://institute.mercy.org.au/lord-send-us-a-breeze/>
- <sup>11</sup> Bolton, G.C., *A thousand miles away: a history of North Queensland to 1920*, ANU Press, 1972.
- <sup>12</sup> *Nuns and Sisters of the Catholic Church in Australia 1838 – 1918*,  
[https://www.clarelibrary.ie/eolas/coclare/genealogy/don\\_tran/emigration/irish\\_nuns\\_australia\\_surname2.htm](https://www.clarelibrary.ie/eolas/coclare/genealogy/don_tran/emigration/irish_nuns_australia_surname2.htm); *Women of vision: Ordinary Women - Extraordinary Lives. Nuns and Sisters of the Catholic Church in Australia 1838 – 1918: Index of Catholic Nuns and Sisters in Australia*,  
<https://sites.google.com/stbedes.catholic.edu.au/womenofvision/home>
- <sup>13</sup> *Frank Tenison Brennan on Julian Tenison Woods*, Eureka Street, 25 May 2010, <https://www.eurekastreet.com.au/article/frank-tenison-brennan-on-julian-tenison-woods>

- 
- <sup>14</sup> Father Peter Hayes, OSA and Margery Tilden, Interview with author, Villanova College Coorparoo, 15 May 2022.
- <sup>15</sup> *Cairns Post*, 20 January 1951, p.3.  
<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/page/3097700>
- <sup>16</sup> Duffy, “Lord, send us a breeze!”
- <sup>17</sup> Meredith Evans rsm and Kay O’Neill rsm, *Mercy and Refugees – A Conversation*, 2019. <https://institute.mercy.org.au/mercy-and-refugees-a-conversation-with-meredith-evans-rsm-and-kay-oneill-rsm/>
- <sup>18</sup> Mt St Bernard College, *Murray McHugh Resource Centre*, 2022, <https://www.msb.qld.edu.au/curriculum/murray-mchugh-resource-centre/>
- <sup>19</sup> *Cairns Post*, 17 April 2019,  
<https://www.cairnspost.com.au/news/cairns/far-north-sister-of-mercy-mary-mchugh-remembered-for-devotion-to-community/news-story/da5e5d55dc515a4cd06ace2e91290612>
- <sup>20</sup> Mt St Bernard College, 2020, *The War Years As recounted by Sr. Mary of Mercy (Wallwork)*,  
<https://www.msb.qld.edu.au/centenary/the-war-years>
- <sup>21</sup> Danella Culloty, Email message to author, 22 May 2021.
- <sup>22</sup> Dr John H. Casey, Carseldine Qld, Letter to the Editor, *The Catholic Leader*, 23 December 2018.
- <sup>23</sup> Danella Culloty, *75th anniversary book Mt St Bernard College*, Selected pages supplied by email to author, 22 May 2021.
- <sup>24</sup> Danella Culloty, Email message to the author, 22 May 2021.
- <sup>25</sup> “Herberton honours a history of Mercy”, based on a report by Sr Rovena Duffy, *The Catholic Leader*, December 9, 2018.
- <sup>26</sup> Mt St Bernard College, 2022, *Our History*,  
<https://www.msb.qld.edu.au/college-profile/our-history/>
- <sup>27</sup> Janelle Casey, Email message to author, 22 May 2021.
- <sup>28</sup> Loretta Giorcelli, *Quality Schools Inclusive Practices: Making Inclusion Work for all Learners*, ebook, [www.abcincluded.com](http://www.abcincluded.com), 2016.
- <sup>29</sup> Marian Clabrough, Email message to author, 28 March 2021.
- <sup>30</sup> *Cairns Post*, 26 February 2016.
- <sup>31</sup> Sr. Irene Masterson rsm, *One Hundred Years of Yarns*, 2020,  
<https://www.msb.qld.edu.au/centenary/index.php/100-years-of-yarns>