

FAMILY CONNECTIONS

“Understanding the past can bless the present and take us mercifully into the future.”

At this time of reflecting on 170 years of the presence of Sisters of Mercy in Australia and Papua New Guinea, I move quietly into the connections of my family with the Sisters, beginning with Ursula Frayne and those who travelled with her.

The Smith family had been living in the Swan River Colony for thirteen years before the Sisters and a permanent Catholic Priest arrived. Catholics John and Elizabeth Smith (nee Cherry) and their eldest son Bernard arrived in the Colony in January 1833, which at that time was a community mainly of Anglican and Wesleyan churchgoers. They were the first Catholics to settle in the Colony. John had been “head hunted” by the British Government as there was no bugler or goldsmith in the Queens 21st Fusiliers leaving for Australia. Their trip from Stirling, Scotland, took them to Tasmania and then Perth, this being the usual route for the Fusiliers as their army was based in both places. Bernard was their eldest son and eventually the pioneer family grew to seven children.

When again reflecting on these links with the Sisters, I am taken back to my childhood and remember the stories told so lovingly by my Grandfather¹. He told the story so that it would not be forgotten and each generation of family would delight in it. Every now and again he would read a quote from “The Imitation of Christ” – a now tattered book that was given to Bernard Smith, my great grandfather, by Ursula Frayne before she left for Melbourne. Of course I really didn’t understand these deep and meaningful words but “Pop” thought I should hear them! The following letter is treasured by the family.



*Convent, Guildford
January 12th 1857*

*“My dear Mrs Smith,²
Wishing to present you and your good husband with some small token of our sincere esteem. I request your acceptance of the accompanying parcel containing The Imitation of Christ for Mr. Smith and two little oratories for yourself. It is a real holy poverty offering, but our good wishes must supply for what is wanting in the gift.....as we may not ever*

again meet in this world, I will now say farewell. May the good Lord bless you. May he bless your children (12) and enable you all by His grace to live so in this world that you may dwell with Him forever in Heaven. I hope you will sometimes remember us in your prayers and Believe me, dear Mrs Smith

*Yours sincerely in JC+
M. Ursula. Frayne*

PS Mother Mary Anne and the Sisters with me unite in best wishes for your happiness and of every member of your family. It would be my desire to take a special leave of my good friends, the Catholic women and many also amongst those who differ in religion, but as I shall not make any stay in Perth, it will be out of my power to do. I therefore request you to say good-bye for me to each of them and assure them I shall not forget to pray for them as I shall always retain a lively interest in their welfare.”

¹ My family ancestors were Smith and my immediate family have retained the name mainly because my mother married my father who also had the surname Smith. The connection is through my Mother.

² Letter from M Ursula Frayne to Mrs. Bernard (Henrietta) Smith

Photo taken when Henrietta was 93 years old with 3 of her children and a great grandchild.

I sometimes feel overwhelmed when I realise that between 1833 and 1845 only one Catholic Priest visited the colony for a few days until Fr. John Brady became the Parish Priest and eventually the Bishop. Several historians, e.g. Lucille Quinlan, J T Reilly, reflect in their writings on how difficult it was for Catholics to suddenly resume their various devotions and practices, especially in relation to the Sacraments. Many Catholics joined the Wesleyan and Anglican Churches during that time (including a few of the Smith family). John's children were baptised Catholics in the Anglican Church. Understanding this 'way of life' was important to the Sisters who had been told by the Bishop to seek out the "otb's" – the 'ought to be' Catholics. The Sisters were much more compassionate in assisting the Catholics, such as my family, in rediscovering the community of Church and a Sacramental life.

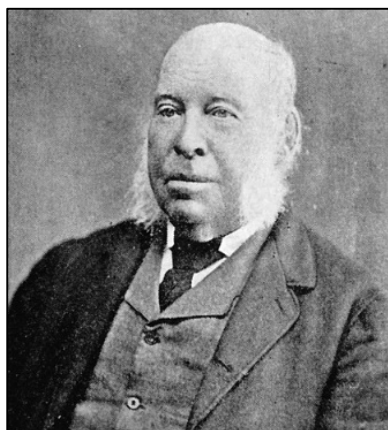
During the intervening years of being without a priest, the Rosary seems to have been the family's "saving grace" and was said in its entirety each day with a crucifix set on the table and a candle when it was available. This crucifix I now have beside my bed as I am seen as the 'Matriarch' of the family at the moment and this will be passed on to another member in due course.

The small Anglican Church in the grounds of the Pioneer Cemetery in East Perth is an important sacred site for the family. Bernard and his siblings who married, required the permit of Bishop Polding (Sydney) to have the Anglican Archdeacon officiate at their wedding in this Church. We all delight in opening the Anglican wedding register (now digital) and exhibiting the Catholic Wedding information. Sometimes my mother would show sadness that even in those days long ago, it was seen important to have the Marriage Ceremony in a Church, when she, nearly 100 years later, had to have her ceremony in the sacristy as dad was not a Catholic.



Bernard and his wife Henrietta and over the years, their twelve children, soon became friends with the Sisters, especially during 1848 when the Sisters decided to build a Convent. The bricks were made on the site of Bernard's property on the corner of Adelaide Terrace and Hill St Perth (now the Fenians Pub!) At the time he was living in Howick St. and built the house over several years. It was possible because of the water spring on the property – one of the many along the Swan River. At that time the River also came within about 50 yards of

Adelaide Terrace. The Sisters paid one brick to Bernard for every twenty that were made. Eventually Bernard moved the brickmaking business to a larger spring and clay pit – now known as Queens Gardens (opposite the famous WACA ground). It was here that the bricks for the 1871 Convent were baked.



To the delight of one of my brothers, at the time of some maintenance being carried out on the original Holy Cross Convent, some bricks were no longer needed. The Sisters kept some for the Mercy Archives and asked if the family would like a few that were left over. He proudly inserted them in his front letter box!

Bernard (left) and Henrietta had forged a strong friendship with the Sisters. So much so that Ursula trusted Bernard with their financial affairs. While in London on her overseas visit, Ursula heard of the attempts of Bishop Serra to prevent the building of the Native Children's Cottage. Below are excerpts of her letter to Bernard to whom she had given

contractual rights to handle the finance required to complete the building and also provide food and necessities for the children and Sisters.

July 12th 1850

"...I know you are too upright and honest to be hindered by any person in the discharge of your duty. I therefore hope to hear that the building is now completed.....I will take this opportunity of advising you as your friend not to take any part in disputes between Bishop Serra or Dr. Urquhart. Remain quite neutral and advise all Catholics that you can influence, to do the same. You will soon see that this is your best plan as well as the mode of acting..." Ursula had further information of the situation which she shared with Bernard at length and concluded the sharing of this profound information by writing:

"I expect you to keep it to yourself. You are bound in honour not to speak of it to any person whomsoever. Remember you are not to obey Fr. Serra if he orders you not to get the children's Cottage built, he has no authority to give such an order... Should you know of our dear Sisters being in want of flour, tea or sugar you may safely order them in any necessary quantity for the Convent and Children's house only, as I have in my hands means to pay and please God will arrive in January 1851....." Ursula then concludes in her usual thoughtful way...." Will you give my most affectionate remembrance to Mrs Smith, your good sisters, and all my other friends whom I am most anxious to see once more.....I have them all before my mind at this moment. Assure them that neither dear Mother Mary Anne, nor myself have given up on the Mission...."

Bernard and Henrietta continued to support the Sisters in their mission. Even in 1868 well after Ursula had left the Colony, Bernard and his now grown up children were supporting them in the still strong Protestant community. From the City of Perth Council Minutes and subsequent account in 'The Inquirer' Bernard led a group of Catholic men in petitioning the Council for the Sisters to be able to commence a Convent as the conditions in the 1848 Convent were inadequate. The Council, after their approval, wrote in the minutes *"...tendered the best thanks to Mr B Smith for his kindness in preparing the plans and specifications submitted to and approved by this meeting. Mr B Smith was requested to superintend the works...."* This refers to the 1871 Convent on the corner of Goderich St and Victoria Square.



Here we see Henrietta Smith and five of her children taken after the death of Bernard. The family had moved out of their house so that Religious coming to Perth had somewhere to stay. When the St John of God Sisters, the last Order to live there, moved to Subiaco Henrietta moved back to the Adelaide Terrace House.

Henrietta's name is mentioned in the minutes of many committees and organisations. In 1879 a meeting was held in the Young Ladies School Room, Perth Convent, by a group organizing one of the now famous Bazaars.

This occasion was in aid of the Orphanages. Henrietta took on the position of Treasurer. She and one of her daughters were also members of the public Bazaar held in 1896 to raise funds for the new school to be known as St Joseph's.³

³ The Grants of the Victoria Square land were handed over to the Sisters of Mercy at the opening of St Joseph's, 1896 and the Ladies College, by Sir John Forrest Governor. West Australian Newspaper 5th June, 1896. 50th Anniversary of arrival.

Some continuing points of Interest

- The “Smith – Sisters of Mercy” association has survived over these many years.
- Children have been attending various Mercy Schools; some family members have joined the vowed life and linked through many activities and projects.
- Sisters sharing the family beach house and being assisted with transport Sisters in the days when they had no cars.
- My mother (Gwen) was the last female member of the family to be given the name “Ursula”. It was a common practice that the middle name would be Ursula.
- My nieces have just been “Troving” together to discover what family members assisted the Sisters in their Bazaar efforts of 1896 – 50th anniversary of arrival. ⁴
- Several cousins and myself were part of the 100th Anniversary in 1946 and enjoy playing “spot the Smith” in the photos taken in the crowded Cathedral Liturgy!

I was privileged to co-ordinate the 150th Mercy Anniversary Mass in the Entertainment Centre. My Mother and a brother assisted in painting the various banners/backdrops and one brother was my sounding board for the process and preparation. A niece participated in the grave site liturgy. Many other family members assisting in the logistics, historical research and setting up of the Entertainment Centre.

The Smith Family were friends with both the Victoria Square and West Perth Mercy Foundations with my mother and other family members attending St Brigid’s School West Perth. My grandmother played the organ for the school at St Pat’s in West Perth and sisters, brothers, nieces and nephews attending a number of Mercy schools.

In Conclusion

Each person has their own story and with families numbering from seven to twelve children the family connections are quite vast. There is a strong interest in preserving the story of the Mercy-Smith connections, however with the many changes within families and the structures of the Sisters of Mercy, this has taken a new turn. “Understanding the past” has been a catch phrase that has strengthened the family through its research and sharing of the story.

With the changes in culture and the changes of the Mercy Institute, connections have changed, some diminished and a few strengthened. In the meantime there is still a strong desire to remember and research more of the story. ⁵ Several family members have moved overseas for a few years and are still researching from there. Recently a remark was made to me by one of the Sisters of Mercy. This story is really in your DNA!!! In deed it is and I am very proud that it is so.

Messages to: Joan Smith rsm joan.smith@mercy.org.au