

## THE STABLE

Let us cast our minds back to 1866, to the stable that stood right here. Father Woods has leased it from Mr William MacDonald for use as a school room. Young John MacKillop has done it up well. He's removed most of the stalls, straightened the slabs, filled in any gaps that might let in wind or rain, tamped the clay floor down hard and lined the path from the street with chaff bags to help counter the effects of the almost constant rain. He's put a scraper by the door so the outside mud is not carried into the room. A lingering smell of horses is the only reminder of the building's former use.

Inside, children sit at wooden desks, concentrating so hard on making their letters and marvelling at how they turn into words and the words become sentences. A petite redhead in a black dress is in charge. That is Miss Mary. She is everywhere, helping and encouraging the children, calling them to attention when their concentration lapses. Her two teenage sisters, cheeky Miss Annie and the mischievous but more serious Miss Lexie, are as busy as bees helping the children, hearing their reading, checking their work and preparing the next day's lessons.

It is a happy place. Miss Mary's eyes sparkled as she looks around. Not so long ago, she'd decided to begin her training as a nun. Not any sort of nun, but a special kind, a Sister of St Joseph. She's always wanted to give her life to God by working with the poor and underprivileged. Therefore, when Father Woods asked her if she would become the very first Sister of St Joseph, the Order he wanted to found so he could get and keep teachers in this out of the way place, she could hardly contain her joy.

This stable served its purpose but it was far from a satisfactory place for a school. Therefore, before the year was out, Father Woods began building a new schoolroom near the church. Then the bishop gave him a job in Adelaide and he had to leave the South East. When the bishop came to visit after Christmas 1866, he called Miss Mary by a new name, Sister Mary. It was a high day for her but a sad one for the parish as they waved Father Woods off.

The new school wasn't finished and so the new priest, Father Michael O'Connor, picked up where Father Woods had left off. It was ready by June and Sister Mary and her sisters left the stable school for good. That move was not a day too soon for, within two weeks, Sister Mary was off to Adelaide to help Father Woods there, leaving her lovely new school behind. As time passed, she stayed in the Sisters' accommodation at the back of the school from time to time, but she had no reason to visit the stable site again.

With Mary, Annie, Lexie and the children gone, the MacDonalds resumed their property and subdivided it into three blocks. Then, after some time, they dismantled the stable and took most of the timber to their property at Kalangadoo. They had cleared the block altogether by 1925, the year the Sisters of St Joseph began to collect evidence on Mary's holiness with a view to having her canonised. On 23 December that year William MacDonald's great-granddaughter, Euphemia Ruth Willshire, signed off on the sale of the block to the Sisters. Then, in 1947, George MacDonald, another of William's

descendants, gave the old stable door to the Sisters. It is now the Mary MacKillop Centre in Adelaide.

At the time of its purchase, the stable block was fenced and locals grazed their animals on it. This arrangement persisted until 1970, at the beginning of a decade when the push towards Mary's canonisation received fresh impetus. It was then that Councillor George Lynn became involved. Thanks to him, the Josephites and the Council worked together to clean up the property, plant trees, shrubs and flowering plants and make it a pleasant place. Today the Wattle Range Council takes full responsibility for the maintenance of the park on behalf of the Sisters of St Joseph.

It is likely that young Richard Denny, a student for the priesthood from Adelaide, was the person who took the only existing photo of the stable in about 1891, the year when Mary remembered the silver jubilee of the foundation of the Congregation here in Penola. It was then that she wrote:

*Twenty-five years ago, we first kept up St Joseph's Day as the special Feast of our proposed Institute and little did either of us then dream of what was to spring from so small a beginning.*

Today our Mary is a saint and I'm sure that that lively MacKillop trio, redheaded Mary with stars in her eyes, cheeky Annie, pensive Lexie, as well as steady, reliable John, the carpenter, and of course, Father Woods and the class of 66 and 67 are all rejoicing with us as we celebrate their memory and that of the generous MacDonald family at a spot where a real education revolution began.

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