

Two Outstanding Laypeople: Bill Box and Vi Feil

Bill Box: Member of the 'Third Order of Jesuits'

Bill Box was born in Hampstead, London, in 1904. He had a rich grounding in church music, from an early age, studying organ and choral work under the well-known Sir Arthur Cowan. He became assistant organist and choirmaster at Christ Church Hampstead at age 16. A month after his arrival in Australia in 1924, at age 20, he was appointed organist and choirmaster of St Paul's Anglican Church in Canterbury. At the same time, he also played the organ at the State Theatre (on the corner of Russell and Flinders St).

Bill became a permanent resident of Hawthorn in 1948, after serving in the A.I.F. in the Middle East and New Guinea and with the British Commonwealth Occupation Force in Japan. Evidence appeared later that while stationed in the Middle East, he and another soldier secretly took bread from their camp to help feed 70 hungry orphans in Jerusalem.

Bill and wife Kath purchased a mixed business in Glenferrie Road, next to the R.S.L. Hall, on the corner of Manningtree Rd. Soon after, in 1952, he became organist and musical director of our church, a position he held until 1988, when failing eyesight led to his retirement, at age 84.

Starting in 1950, Bill established the Manresa Musical Society, producing annual musicals throughout the 1950s, commencing with Iolanthe. These musicals were extremely popular with parishioners and the broader public and showcased the wonderful talent existing amongst our young at the time. (See separate feature on the Manresa Musical Society).



Mens' Sodality c. 1950. Bill front row, to left of Fr Magan

During that time, Bill taught countless nuns from all over Victoria to play the organ and several lay people as well. He also helped the nuns with school choirs, most notably Santa Maria, Kilbreda and Mater Christi. The choir would be brought to a certain standard by the nuns, then Bill would put on the final polish, conduct the girls at various Eisteddfods and nearly always arrive home with a first placing.

A Justice of the Peace for over 35 years, Bill divided his time equally between the Church, the Police Station and home. As well as being involved as organist and choirmaster, Bill was a member of many church committees. So much time was spent at the church that his family referred to him as belonging to the Third Order of Jesuits!

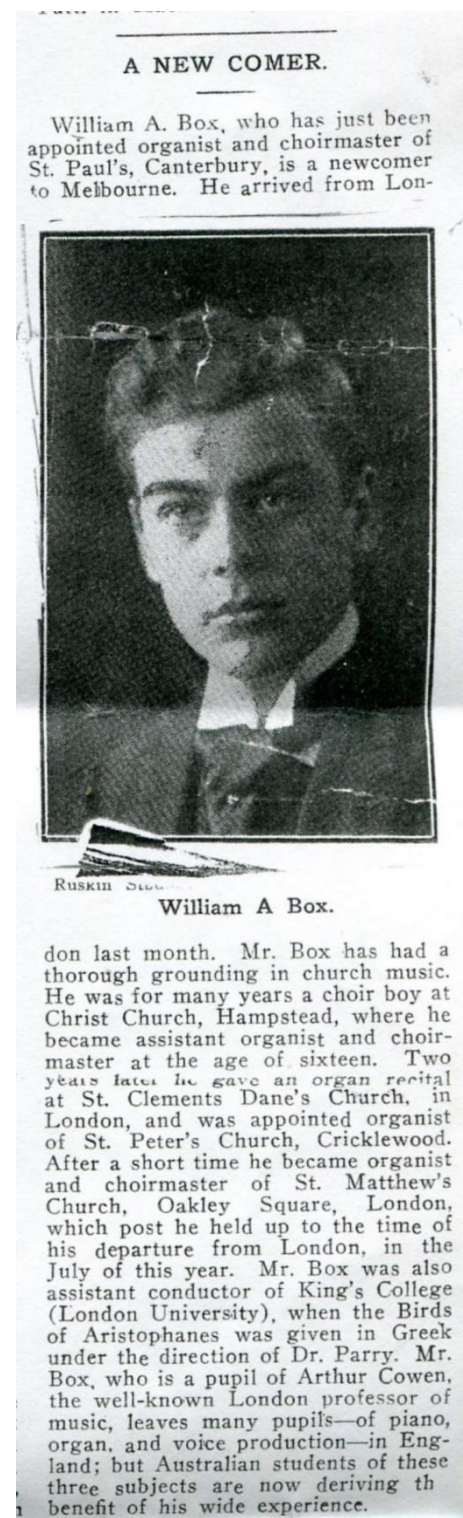
Apart from his dedicated membership of both the Men's Sodality and Confraternity, Bill was part of the organising committee for the first Sacrificial Giving Campaign in 1964 and a foundation member of the first Parish Pastoral Council in 1971. He also was a counter of church collections on the first Sunday of the month almost to the day he died.

In the mid 1960s, the Parish established a Youth Advisory Committee to coordinate all 'youth' activities in the parish and to suggest other options. Bill was elected president as it was considered that he understood how best his organisation could work for the good of the parish and for younger people. He was also president of the ICC Centenary Committee which organised the celebrations for 1969.

In the eulogy at his funeral, daughter Marj Coghlan ended with the following:

'Dad won't have left many material possessions – they didn't mean much to him. I never knew him to want anything for himself. He was quite happy with the clothes he stood up in, a meal in front of him, a roof over his head – and Mum!

He will have left us many more valuable things – a love of music, and an example of commitment to and appreciation of his Catholic faith. Dad became a Catholic when he was 21. He jokingly told me that Mum wouldn't marry him if he wasn't a Catholic. I say jokingly because this was a man who often went to three Masses on Sunday – two to play the organ and one to go to Communion and take up the collection.'



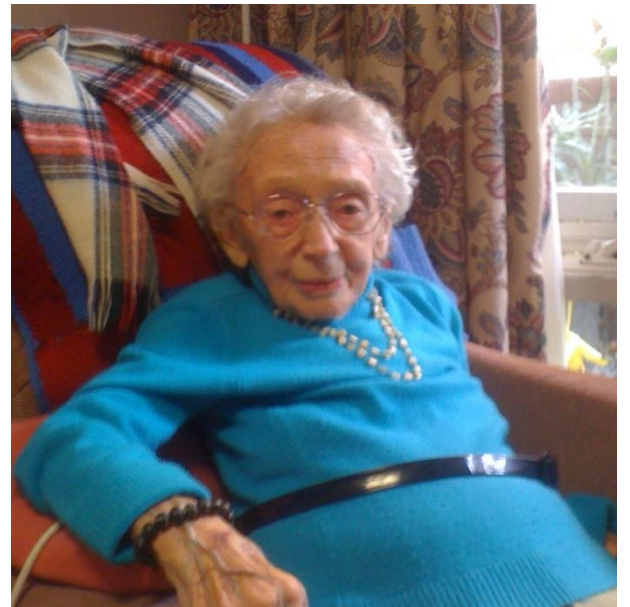
At the organ with Fr Brian Murphy. Final performance c. 1988.

Vi Feil: Humble, holy, centenarian (1904-2014)

Over the 150 years of the parish's existence, none have lived longer than Vi Feil. It could also be said that none have lived such a holy life where love of faith and love of church always predominated.

Although no exact records are held, it is likely Vi joined the Children of Mary in the 1920s and then later the Women's Sodality. In both organisations she held various offices. An enduring image of Vi, even in her final days, was with rosary beads in hand. How she loved Our Lady and the rosary.

Vi had a prodigious memory, as outlined by her nephew, Chris Feil, in the following recollection. Her memories of the parish over 100 years are frequently referenced by Fr Michael Head SJ in his superb history of our parish 'Walking in Faith: The Village over the Creek. Hawthorn: the Catholic Story.' (2007)



Vi at St Joseph's Hostel



Some of Vi's recollections:

That Father Hearn in the late 1920s would not allow women to dance the Charleston in the new Manresa Hall.

At a Mass at St Joseph's in the late 1960s, Fr Fitzgerald said the 'prayers after Mass' for the conversion of Russia and then turned to the congregation and said 'That is the last time we will ever say it, and may God forgive us.'

The first of several migrant chaplains to spend time in Hawthorn was Mexican Jesuit Fr Eduardo De La Peza in the 1930s. Who but Vi could remember his marvellous singing voice and the way he did the 5.30am Mass on Holy Saturday morning for several years? (Who could remember a 5.30am mass in the parish on Holy Saturday morning?)

Vi was very interested in the work of Jesuit missionaries, in particular those Australians working in Hazaribag in India. She was a keen participant in the stamp group which operated at St Joseph's Hostel for many years and raised substantial sums of money for the missions.

When Vi turned 110, at that age one of the very oldest women in Australia, she firmly refused nephew Phillip Brady's request to have an article written about her in the media. Such was her humility. Now she cannot say no!

It is a safe bet to say that no-one in the church's 150 years has spent more time in it than Vi Feil. One can also be sure that those who were privileged to know Vi would agree that no more saintly person has lived in our parish.

Chris Feil reflects on the life of his aunt

Annie Raphaëlle Violet Feil was born on July 17 1904 in Dunedin New Zealand. She died on Aug 3 2014 having celebrated her 110th birthday during the previous month. She was one of 5 children and was the second eldest. There were four females and a male. Raimonda Fradelle, Violet and Julius John Joseph were born in New Zealand with Muriel Gabrielle and Alberta Dolores born in Australia. Each one pre-deceased her. The family migrated to Australia in 1907 and settled in Hawthorn living in Burwood Road and later at 36 Wattle Road Hawthorn until 1996.

Vi never married. She and Dolores lived at the Wattle Road address for 78 years before moving into the now defunct St Joseph's Home for the Elderly in Elgin Street. Vi along with Dolores were very well-known Hawthorn residents. A lot of Vi's life revolved around the Immaculate Conception Church.



Vi with Dolores c. 1950

As Vi never held a driver's licence, she used to walk everywhere and occasionally use the tram/train. Vi originally trained as a stenographer and worked in a variety of office settings including a solicitor's office, real estate agent's office and later with the Institute of Chartered Accountants. She was educated at Kilmaire and later at Genazzano.

Growing up in a house of five children where everyone had a role, hers was to work and bring in a wage to help the family. The role of Dolores the youngest was to cook. She was a very caring person and showed a lot of interest in people whether they be in the past or in the present.

She used to type up the newsletter for St Joseph's home on an old mechanical typewriter made in the mid 1930's. She stopped doing this at 105 due to vision challenges.

Her memory was phenomenal. She could reminisce about growing up in Hawthorn during the WW1 and WW2 eras, talk about cable trams, the sinking of the Titanic and the Great Depression

but was equally at home talking about news and current affairs. In 1996, I met the Atlanta Feils for the first time and we exchanged some family photos some of which contained unidentified members. When I showed one of these to Vi, she identified them all complete with a couple of stories about some of them. She was a link to the past with her foot firmly planted in the present providing a fabulous family resource and a caring unselfish role model. She is sorely missed by quite a range of people including family, friends and people who knew her.

Chris Feil (nephew) Aug 18 2019



Vi with father Otto and brother