

# Were, Veryl Dawn (Mitchell) (1927–2013)

Veryl D. Mitchell was an Australian missionary nurse who served in Kenya at the [Kendu Mission Hospital](#) for ten years. She was one of several Australian nurses who dedicated their lives to serve in Kenya.

## Early Life

Veryl Dawn Mitchell was born on April 18, 1927, in Cooranbong, New South Wales Australia.<sup>1</sup> She was the third of the four daughters and son of William George Mitchell (1895-1975) and Esther Mary Mitchell *née* Fehlberg (1890-1969). Her siblings included Alma Atchison, Heather Maxwell, and Stella Scholtz, and brother Alva Mitchell. Her mother, Esther May Mitchell, was a woman of strong Adventist heritage. She was born into the Fehlberg

family in Collinsvale, Tasmania, in 1890. She trained as a nurse at the Sydney Sanitarium and pursued a career in nursing until her marriage in 1920 to William George Mitchell, also an early Adventist in Australia.<sup>2</sup> William “Bill” Mitchell was the older brother of Adventist ministers Pastor Albert Mitchell and Pastor Tom Mitchell. Esther and William were devoted members of the Albury Church in New South Wales, where they raised their five children. On June 26, 1969, Esther passed away after a brief illness at the age of 79, leaving behind her husband William and their five children. They had been married for forty-nine years.<sup>3</sup>

William George Mitchell was born in Rutherglen, Victoria, in 1892.<sup>4</sup> He attended Avondale College (now, [Avondale University](#)) and, after completing his studies, took up a job as a boilermaker at the Sanitarium Weetbix factory in Cooranbong. He took the job to support his brothers, Albert and Tom as they completed their education and entered the ministry.<sup>5</sup> As soon as they completed these efforts, William took up a job on the *Melanesia*, an Adventist mission boat that took the gospel message to the South Seas. He served as the ship’s



The Were Family--Cyril, Carlyle and Veryl, 1992.

Photo courtesy of Godfrey K. Sang (received from Veryl Were).

engineer (as a missionary engineer), and during this time, he was based in the Solomon Islands. It was while working at the boilers at Wahroonga Sanitarium that he met nurse Esther Fehlberg, and they were married in 1920. He then became a farmer in the Albury area, New South Wales, 550km south of Sydney. In his later years, he suffered from blindness and deafness. On September 7, 1975, he passed away at Albury Base Hospital, New South Wales, and was laid to rest at the Waugh Road Cemetery, Albury.<sup>6</sup>

## Employment

Veryl grew up in Albury and later trained at the Sidney Sanitarium and Hospital to become a nurse. She graduated in 1952 and briefly worked at the Sydney Sanitarium and Hospital before moving to the West Australian Missionary College (now [Carmel College](#)) in Carmel, Western Australia. She served there alongside her future husband Cyril Were, who was a teacher at that college and at some point their preceptor. She worked there as the nursing matron until November 1957 when she accepted the call to serve in the mission field.<sup>7</sup> Her father being a missionary may have motivated her decision to go into missions. Two of her paternal uncles were already serving in the ministry.

Initially, the General Conference called Veryl to serve in India at the [Vincent Hill School](#) in Musoorie, India.<sup>8</sup> The school, founded in 1912, was intended for Anglo-Indian and European children of missionaries.<sup>9</sup> It was situated on the picturesque foothills of the Himalayas. After India's independence, work permits for expatriate staff were difficult to obtain, and that may have convinced the General Conference to rescind Veryl's appointment and instead send her to Kendu.

## Mission Service

In January 1958, Veryl arrived at Kendu Mission Hospital in Kenya. She would be the first of a number of Australian missionaries who would serve at Kendu in Kenya. The hospital, which had been founded in 1925, was one of the largest private health facilities in Western Kenya. The administration team was led by Dr. [Siegfried A. Kotz](#), a missionary of German descent, together with South African Dr. Walter Birkenstock serving as assistant director.<sup>10</sup> Both of them also served as the staff physicians. Nurse June Wilson was the director of nurses.

The School of Nursing, where Veryl was to work, was led by Rena A. Curtis, with Alberta M. Parish as her assistant. Supervisors of Clinical Service included Alberta M. Parish for Out-Patient Services, Darlene E. Lainchbury for Surgery, June Wilson for Medical Services, and Alberta M. Parish, who also supervised Maternity.<sup>11</sup> There were dozens of African staff working with them.

By 1966, Kendu was handling about 19,000 patients, which meant an average of 50 patients per day.<sup>12</sup> This, by any standard, was heavy work, particularly with the meagre and aging facilities there. Veryl spent much of her time in the Nursing School that trained the next generation of medical workers in the Adventist health system.

Kendu Hospital trained health workers for the region including Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, and even the Congo. When she arrived in 1957, the Nursing School was under the direction of Rena A. Curtis, assisted by Alberta M. Parish.<sup>13</sup> She arrived at Kendu and was given midwifery classes to teach at the school of Nursing.

## Life at Kendu

Kendu Mission Hospital, situated by the western shores of the vast Lake Victoria, was established in 1925 in the country that is home to the [Luo people](#). The Adventists first came there in 1906, setting up the mission on a hill a short distance from the lake. Kendu is mostly hot, dry and humid through much of the year. Malaria was endemic in the region, so the hospital was kept busy. The mission campus included the church, a large and very busy printing press, and the hospital. At the hospital itself, several key developments were underway in the late 1950s and the early 1960s. The hospital saw an increase in personnel, strengthening its capacity to serve the local community. Other than teaching midwifery, Veryl was also placed in charge of the Maternity Ward.

In 1960, Dr. Kotz left, paving way for Dr. W. W. Oliphant.<sup>14</sup> Other staff changes included the coming of Dr. W. H. Taylor as the assistant medical director and Sheila Robertson, who was in charge of pediatric nursing.<sup>15</sup> In 1961, Dr. Allan W. Perepelitza moved to Kendu as the assistant director, together with his wife and their children Allan, Julie Marie, and Lisa Renee.<sup>16</sup> He would take over from Dr. Calkin, who had been the director after Dr. Oliphant. The hospital required significant re-equipping and rebuilding to maintain effectiveness and meet modern medical standards.

Nevertheless, Veryl did her very best under the circumstances. Development of infrastructure became a priority objective for the administration, which aimed to enhance the quality of care provided at the facility. The hospital's improvement was part of broader efforts within the East African Union to elevate the standard of medical services.

Early in 1963, Mitchell was due to leave for her furlough, so she headed to Australia after continuously serving for five years in Kenya. As soon as she returned in August 1963, she went on to work with the new intake of students coming in for their two-year course. By this time, Josephine Clayburn had taken over as the matron of Kendu, and June Wilson was dedicating more time to teaching. In 1966, Dr. [Kenneth H. Sturdevant](#) took charge of the facility.

## Return to Australia and Further Work

In 1967, she returned to Australia from Kenya after giving nearly nine years' service to the East Africa Union and the Trans-Africa Division. The Associate Secretary of the General Conference, Pastor Clyde Franz, commended for her service, which she greatly appreciated. She left behind her fellow Australian missionary nurses, who included Gwenyth L. Davis of Warburton and Lola Hill of Coal Point (Newcastle).<sup>17</sup>

## Marriage and Family

On August 29, 1967, she married Cyril Raymond Were at the Albury Church where she grew up. Cyril was an elder at the Prospect Church, South Australia. Cyril Raymond Were was born on June 21, 1914, in Prospect, South Australia. After attending Avondale College, he served his country during World War II. Cyril began his ministry as a singing evangelist and Bible worker with the South Queensland Conference. He later worked as a preceptor and teacher at Carmel College in Western Australia (formerly the West Australian Missionary College).

On May 19, 1938, he married his first wife, Vera, who predeceased him in 1964. Together they had a son, Rae. He then married Veryl in 1967, and they had a son, Carlyle.

## Further Work

Veryl Were returned to nursing practice, working in Adelaide as she raised their son. She worked until her retirement in the early 1980s. Through that period, she was active in ministry and often conducted hydrotherapy or home-treatment demonstrations as part of health series conducted by the church. The series featured a nutrition talk, a food preparation demonstration with tasting, and then a hydrotherapy demonstration by Veryl Were, which often lasted ten to fifteen minutes. They eventually retired and settled at Greenacres, a suburb of Adelaide, New South Wales, where they lived out their days.<sup>18</sup>

## Death and Legacy

Cyril died on October 17, 2009, at the age of 95. He was survived by Veryl and his children, Rae Leomme from his first wife and Carlyle with Veryl. Veryl died on October 7, 2013, at the age of 86. She is best remembered for her instruction at Kendu School of Nursing where scores of midwifery students passed through her instruction. She set the standards in midwifery training, and her students were highly sought after by leading hospitals, both within the Adventist health system and the government. She also ran the busy maternity ward at the Kendu Mission Hospital.

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## NOTES

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2. "Veryl Dawn Mitchell," *MyHeritage.com*, accessed August 29, 2024, see [here](#).
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5. Kay Duursma, "Remembering Mission," *Australasian Record*, December 23, 2017, 19.
6. Byrne, 14.
7. "West Australian Missionary College," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, 1958, 255.
8. Minutes of the Two Hundred Thirty-third Meeting General Conference Committee, November 14, 1957, 1056, <https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Minutes/GCC/GCC1957-11.pdf>, accessed August 29, 2024.
9. Cheryl Christo Howson and Gordon E. Christo, "Vincent Hill School and College," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*, <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/>, accessed August 29, 2024.
10. "Kendu Mission Hospital," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, 1958, 268.
11. Ibid.
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14. E. D. Hanson, "Golden Jubilee in Kenya," *ARH*, February 28, 1957, 20.

15. "Kendu Mission Hospital," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, 1961, 296.

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18. The writer kept correspondence with Mrs. Were as she had taught his mother at Kendu between 1966 and 1967. She graciously shared the photographs published herein.

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