

# Mitchell, Edna May

## (1909–1980)

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### HELEN MILLER

Helen Miller, born to William and Nancy Hay and educated in Brisbane, Australia, felt called by God to become a missionary nurse after hearing of health needs in the Pacific. She graduated from the Sydney Sanitarium and Hospital (now Sydney Adventist Hospital) in 1969 with high distinction before proceeding to nurse in the Solomon Islands and Australia and then in New Zealand and Pitcairn Island with first husband Pastor Lewis Barker. Helen's Master of Ministry (Family Life) degree (2009) reflects her love of study and is used in Toowoomba, supporting her husband, Pastor Keith Miller.

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After graduating from the Sydney Sanitarium and Hospital in 1934, Edna May Mitchell served the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church as a nurse for 36 years. She was the matron of the Warburton SDA Hospital for twenty of those years until her retirement in 1971.



Edna May Mitchell

From *Australasian Record*, February 16, 1981.

## Early Life

Edna May Mitchell was born on August 19, 1909, in Kempsey, NSW, Australia.<sup>1</sup> Her father was Robert James Mitchell (1879–1964).<sup>2</sup> Her mother was Fredericka Mitchell (1869–1954).<sup>3</sup> She was their only daughter, her brothers being Albert H. (born in 1905),<sup>4</sup> Stanley Raymond (1908–1973),<sup>5</sup> and a younger brother, Leslie.<sup>6</sup> Birth and death records indicate that the family lived at Nulla in the Kempsey district as Edna's mother was buried in the family cemetery there.<sup>7</sup>

## Education

From 1926 to 1929 Edna attended the Australasian Missionary College, where she was baptized in her first year.<sup>8</sup> Her studies included the preparatory course (for which the prerequisite was completion of the primary school course) in 1926 and 1927. In the following two years she studied other subjects, including typing and stenography (elements of the business course), which would be useful to her in her future career.<sup>9</sup>

In 1930 Edna commenced work and study at the Sydney Sanitarium, culminating in her graduation as a registered nurse on December 6, 1934, with eight other young women who chose as their motto “His Purpose Is Ours.”<sup>10</sup> In 1935 she undertook the obstetrics course at the Queen Victoria Hospital in Melbourne.<sup>11</sup>

## Working Life

The longest phase of Edna’s life was spent in her chosen profession—nursing—living out her graduation motto. She worked as a sister at the Warburton Sanitarium and Hospital from 1935 to 1939. From there she transferred to the Sydney Sanitarium and Hospital, working as a theater sister from 1939 to 1942, and again from 1946 to 1950. She also worked there as deputy matron from 1942 to 1946.<sup>12</sup>

After 11 years of experience in Sydney, the Trans-Commonwealth Union Conference invited Edna to become matron of the Warburton Sanitarium and she accepted, commencing there on August 1, 1950.<sup>13</sup> More than once she gave health presentations at camp meetings in South New South Wales with the Warburton Sanitarium manager and a doctor.<sup>14</sup>

In 1954 she suffered personal grief with the death of her mother.<sup>15</sup> A happier time came three years later when she took six months leave, at her own expense, to visit sanitariums and hospitals in other parts of the world. One of the places she visited was the Youngberg Hospital in Singapore, where she stayed with her 1934 classmate, Marjorie Grieve.<sup>16</sup> A photo of Matron Mitchell and Matron Grieve together was taken.<sup>17</sup> Incidentally at this time there were three Matrons from the same 1934 graduating class working in three Adventist hospitals, with Sister Rita Rowe commencing a nineteen year term at the Sydney Sanitarium and Hospital in 1953 as Matron, following Matron Burnside’s retirement.<sup>18</sup>

In 1964 *Australasian Record* readers were saddened to read that “after a number of years of very capable and valued service as matron of the Warburton Sanitarium and Hospital, Miss Edna Mitchell has been compelled by a serious health condition to take extended leave, and is at present a patient in the Sydney Sanitarium and Hospital. Suffering considerable pain from arthritis, we feel sure she would appreciate prayers for relief and healing.”<sup>19</sup> According to L. C. Coombe, “her arthritic condition caused her to take a year’s leave at Port Macquarie. At that time she asked to be anointed and firmly believed God relieved her condition and allowed her to return to the work she so dearly loved.”<sup>20</sup>

Matron Mitchell’s work at Warburton was not just the day-to-day overseeing of patient care, but included planning for an expanding hospital with new facilities and more staff. Three months before she arrived, a new hospital wing had been opened with 12 beds, giving the entire sanitarium and hospital a capacity of 54.<sup>21</sup> More building projects, which increased her joy—and workload—were the completion of a new nurses home in 1957,<sup>22</sup> a physical medicine wing in 1959,<sup>23</sup> and the opening of the Barclay Bell wing in 1962,<sup>24</sup> which brought bed numbers to 110. Health education and public relation exercises increased with stop-smoking plans,<sup>25</sup> a choir of

staff members and their families,<sup>26</sup> cooking demonstrations,<sup>27</sup> hospital tours,<sup>28</sup> and the Vacation Health Programme.<sup>29</sup>

## Retirement Years

Edna Mitchell retired in 1971.<sup>30</sup> She moved to a housing unit at Kressville, Cooranbong, NSW, and died nine years later in the Sydney Adventist Hospital on November 27, 1980.<sup>31</sup>

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