

# Zanotti, Wilton

## Edward

### (1917–1987)

#### SHIRLEY TARBURTON

Shirley Tarburton, M.Litt. (Distinction) (University of New England, Armidale, New South Wales, Australia) retired in 2008 after 40 years teaching church-school (mainly high school but including eight years at university). An Australian, she has taught in four mission fields, Australia, and New Zealand. She has authored five books and co-authored one on church history, biography and family history, as well as several magazine articles. She is married to Dr. Michael Tarburton with two adult children and four grandchildren.



Wedding of Bill and Hilda Zanotti, May 6, 1942

Photo courtesy of Joy Watts Née Zanotti.

Wilton Edward (Bill) Zanotti was a Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) teacher and educational administrator who worked in church schools in

Queensland, Western Australia and New Zealand. He spent ten years at the Aboriginal mission school at Mona Mona where he established a choir and brass band, which became widely known and appreciated.

## Early Life and Education

Wilton Edward (Bill) Zanotti was born on December 1, 1917 to Edward Bernard Zanotti (1892-1965) and his wife Elizabeth Mary (Everett, 1894-1949) in Bismark (now Collinsvale), Tasmania.<sup>1</sup> He was a fourth-generation Seventh-day Adventist as his parents, paternal grandparents, and great-grandfather were all Seventh-day Adventists. His grandfather was baptized in 1905<sup>2</sup> and his grandmother a few years earlier,<sup>3</sup> while her father, Carl Friedrich Wilhelm Fehlberg, had been baptized in 1889.<sup>4</sup> When Bill was three years old his sister Meryl Florence (Stingel, 1920-2001) was born. After his mother died, his father married again, and a half-brother, Kelvin John (1951), and a half-sister, Ronell Florence (1953), completed the family. Bill's rural hometown was a strong center of Seventh-day Adventism<sup>5</sup> and growing up in this community with an active faith strengthened his own faith.<sup>6</sup>

His father was very musical, being a choir-leader and conducting the Collinsvale Brass Band.<sup>7</sup> Bill was also blessed with musical talents and was able to play many brass instruments, including the trumpet, cornet, and trombone.<sup>8</sup> From his father, he also developed a love of growing fruit and vegetables.<sup>9</sup>

Bill completed his primary schooling at the church school in Collinsvale and attended secondary school in Hobart.<sup>10</sup> He then spent 1936-1941 at the Australasian Missionary College at Avondale where he undertook primary teacher training, taking a reduced study load each year to enable him to work to earn his fees.<sup>11</sup>

## Marriage and Family

Upon graduating he was first appointed to the newly-opened SDA school in Albury, New South Wales,<sup>12</sup> but by June 1942 had commenced teaching the middle grades at the Bickley SDA primary school in Western Australia.<sup>13</sup> This school was located next to the Western Australian Missionary College (WAMC, now called Carmel College) where a talented young lady was teaching music. Given his love of music, Bill was drawn to May and on May 6, 1943 they were married in the Bickley SDA Church.<sup>14</sup>

Hilda May Schultz had been born May 29, 1921 in Morwell, Victoria,<sup>15</sup> the fourth of five children of George Schultz (1870-1965) and his wife Coral Hilda (Pope, 1889-1971). She grew up in Western Australia and the home was a spiritual one, with an active association with the Salvation Army.<sup>16</sup> After several years of contact with the SDA Church, May's mother was baptized in 1940<sup>17</sup> and her father some years later.<sup>18</sup> May also joined the Church, and being a qualified music teacher, obtained employment at WAMC.<sup>19</sup>

Bill and May had five children, Coral Beth (born in Perth, W. A.), Leita-Mae (born in Cairns, Queensland), Nanette Joy (born in Cairns), Kevin Wilton (born in Cairns), and Ashley Shane (born in Perth, W. A.)

## Career

In January 1945, Bill and May accepted an appointment to Mona Mona Mission School, the SDA Church's first aboriginal mission station, which was jointly operated by the Church and the Australian government.<sup>20</sup> When their first child was only six weeks old they made one of the longest train trips in Australia, from Perth in Australia's southwest to Cairns, Queensland in the northeast, traveling the last fifty-five kilometers to the mission by road.<sup>21</sup>

The Zanotti family spent ten years at this isolated outpost, where Bill was at first the headmaster of the mission school, then from January 1952 until December 1954, the superintendent of the whole mission.<sup>22</sup> In addition to teaching classes, Bill assisted with the mission's garden programs and sawmill, keeping the large saws in good condition and driving the timber truck down the steep mountain range to Cairns. His practical skills enabled him to fix the pumps and vehicles when they broke down and to solve many problems associated with living in the tropics, where floods would often isolate the mission station and the dirt road to the nearest town, Kuranda,

became impassable.<sup>23</sup> He shared his skills beyond the mission compound, spending many weeks working on the new Cairns church building where his “carpentry had contributed in no small measure to the work of building.”<sup>24</sup>

His love of music found expression in the mixed choir he founded, and then, after the acquisition of a number of brass instruments in 1949, the brass band which spread the fame of the mission far and wide.<sup>25</sup> The skill the boys in the band were able to develop and the striking appearance they made in their smart uniforms engendered a sense of pride and accomplishment. Both the choir and the band performed frequently, not only at mission services, but also at community events at Kuranda and further afield at Cairns, Townsville, and at campmeetings.<sup>26</sup>

Although May was not employed and had four small children to care for by the time they left Mona Mona she found much to do to enrich the lives of all at the mission. As an accomplished pianist, she accompanied the choir and congregational singing and taught the aboriginal girls to play the piano and organ. “One of May’s students was still playing the organ in Kuranda SDA Church in the 1990s. At the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Mona Mona in 2013, one of the aboriginal elders stated that at some stages ‘nearly all the girls on the mission could play the piano.’”<sup>27</sup> May also taught the girls sewing.

In January 1955, Bill was transferred to the Zillmere (Brisbane, Queensland) SDA School where he was headmaster for four years.<sup>28</sup> During this time he took the opportunity to take some night classes at the university for further study; however, the pressures of work prevented him from completing more than a few subjects. He taught classes as well as carrying out his administrative duties, ran the Brisbane Adventist Brass Band, taught Sabbath School lessons, and was regularly scheduled to preach sermons.<sup>29</sup>

Because his three daughters were now attending school, he found it difficult to afford church school fees for the three of them on his salary. May could not go out to work as their young son was still a baby, so Bill considered sending them to a state school or looking for some night work, both ideas which were unacceptable to the conference. Bill felt it imperative for church leaders to be encouraged to bring teachers’ wages more into line with pastors’ wages, which resulted in tensions between him and his employers.<sup>30</sup>

In January 1958 the Zanotti family sailed across the Tasman Sea to Christchurch, New Zealand where Bill became principal of the Christchurch Central School at Papanui.<sup>31</sup> This appointment brought opportunities for new experiences and the family enjoyed holidays exploring the beauties of nature that New Zealand had to offer. Mountain climbing and playing in the snow were novel activities and Bill was also able to enjoy his hobby of photography.<sup>32</sup>

However, their New Zealand years were difficult ones. Although he had a reputation as a strong principal, effective teacher, and fair disciplinarian, Bill’s training to teach primary school did not prepare him for the high school classes he needed to teach. Each night he had to master the material he was to teach the next day and developed stomach ulcers and headaches from the stress. May also became ill from the cold and was seemingly not able to recover.<sup>33</sup>

Commencing in January 1963, Bill was transferred back to Western Australia as principal of the Victoria Park SDA primary and junior secondary schools in Perth. He was also appointed conference education secretary, assisting the president.<sup>34</sup> Back in her home state, May recovered her health and a year later, although she was in her forties, their last son was born. Bill approached his new job with renewed vigor, but, unfortunately, still suffered from ulcers and headaches. He was as interested in his students' spiritual growth as in their academic development and a number of his students were baptized over the years.<sup>35</sup>

He continually sought to find ways to improve the educational experience of his students. His school finished at year 10 and students then needed to travel to Carmel College, thirty-four kilometers away if they wanted to attend an SDA school for their final two years of high school. To facilitate that, he purchased a bus to safely transport the year 11 and 12 students from Victoria Park to Carmel and back every day. He rostered himself and other teachers to do this for many years, considerably lengthening their working day.<sup>36</sup>

In the early 1970s he relinquished the principalship and his role as education secretary because of his declining health, but continued teaching at Victoria Park. In 1972, responding to changes being brought about in education by the government allowing the teaching of curricula designed by teachers themselves, he pushed for the incorporation of more Adventist content in courses. This was endorsed by Mr L. R. Thrift, education secretary for the Trans Australia Union Conference.<sup>37</sup>

On December 31, 1973, Bill Zanotti took early retirement due to his ill health.<sup>38</sup> This necessity was a great disappointment to him and he greatly missed the sense of usefulness and interaction he had always enjoyed with his students and staff.<sup>39</sup>

Bill bought a house in York, W. A. and the Zanotti family lived there for a while before moving to Busselton, W. A. where "he enjoyed his remaining years, gardening, participating in the brass band, doing some mechanical work and helping those in need."<sup>40</sup> Here, he died in his garden on September 30, 1987, two months short of his seventieth birthday. May succumbed to cancer just over a year later on January 22, 1989, at only sixty-seven years of age.<sup>41</sup>

Both are remembered for their dedication and loving care for all for whom they worked.

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