

Margaret Coten Obituary

This was Meg's Obituary, written by well known journalist Patrick Cornish and published in The West Australian newspaper following her death.



Intrepid and selfless

MARGARET (MEG) COTEN

Social worker

Born: Narrogin, 1923

Died: Perth, aged 96

World War II battered many of society's building blocks: families, workplaces, hopes for children's futures.

A relatively new concept, "social worker", was seen as part of the massive repair task.

Meg Porter, a farmer's daughter in the WA Wheatbelt, felt she had something to offer, having backed the war effort through three years as a radar operator in the WAAAF (Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force). An aunt had regaled the family with dramas and delights from her years as a medical missionary on Pacific islands.

Something else turned Meg's mind and heart towards work with people who could use help.

The Depression had hit hard during her school years. She had seen men so desperate for a meal and money to feed their families, that they came into the family farm to chop wood even before asking for any paid arrangement.

Meg had seen the face of desolation and never forgot it.

In March 1945, with the war almost over, she joined five other women who had won a Red Cross scholarship to the University of Adelaide. WA then had no school of social work. The train ride across the Nullarbor launched a life of adventure and professional achievement.

Meg's accomplished memoir offers colourful recall and lively sense of humour. She is buoyed by successes, notably with Aboriginal people on the crucial issue of their housing.

In September 1975, she was appointed Narrogin's first woman Justice of the Peace, and later as a member of the Children's Court. She was the first social worker appointed to the town's hospital.

Playing constructive social roles in this region had an extra dimension because it was there she had grown up, picked wild cranberries and ridden her horse, Myrtle, to school.

Margaret Leishman Porter was born in Narrogin on October 11, 1923, the youngest of three children of Agnes (nee Leishman) and Irish-born Robert Porter.

The family farm, Linton, was at Highbury, between Narrogin and Wagin.

Margaret, always known as Meg, and her brothers, Tom and Dick, lived there until she went to boarding school in Albany. (The children had a half-sister, Eileen, from Robert Porter's first marriage. His wife died young, of illness, as did his second wife.)

Meg's thirst for fresh horizons was born in her Highbury school's library, especially stories about Canada.

"I burned with desire to wear snow shoes," she was to write, "avoid... the Badlands, take furs on my dog sled to trade at the Hudson Bay Company Store. I read my father's Wild West stories and yearned for wilder frontiers. I read under the desk at school, riding home and whenever I had a free hand to hold a book."

In late 1941, she left Albany High, where she had been head girl, and considered nursing as a career.

The entry of the United States into the war, after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, underlined the urgency of training carers and healers. Five minutes listening to a stern matron, however, deterred Meg from going any further. The WAAAF, which she joined in September 1942, proved a better option.

In Adelaide, she chose to concentrate on the medical side of social work, so was pleased, after graduating in 1949, to get work at Royal Perth Hospital and Hollywood Repatriation.

Among later posts were Fremantle and Princess Margaret hospitals, and within the Commonwealth Immigration Department, guiding migrants.

Four years travelling in Europe with friends broadened her life education.

More of the "wilder frontiers" she had once longed for opened up while a governess in northern WA – at Mardie Station, near Karratha, and Forrest River Mission (now Oombulgurri, near Wyndham).

Mardie was where she first met John Coten, who made windmills for rural properties, but she got to know him better after he, seriously injured in an accident, was flown to Perth by the Royal Flying Doctor for hospital treatment.

The memoir describes acceptance of his marriage proposal as the “best decision of my life”.

In 1963, they wed in Port Hedland, in a Nissen hut doubling as school and Roman Catholic church.

Meg would have many opportunities to prove her capacity to adapt. The couple lived in a tent on the Nullarbor while John worked setting baits for wild dogs. Insects didn’t worry her, she wrote in a magazine article, but redback spiders were “treated with respect”.

John’s death in 1970, after a stroke, devastated Meg, whose sons were five and four. The three settled back in Narrogin, where Meg retired in 1988 and lived until 1997, when she went to live in the Perth suburb of Bicton.

Meg died on September 26, survived by sons, Ned and Jim, and five grandchildren.

The Porter farm, now run by Meg’s nephew, Philip Porter, remained a haven of memories for her. She hated the school blazer of brown, yellow and green stripes, but for 90 years lived up to the school motto, “Keep Troth”.

Loyalty was her long suit.

Patrick Cornish