



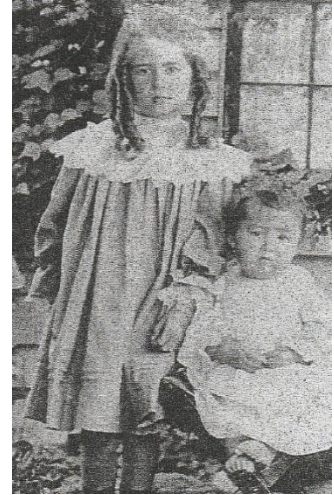
Myrtle's Story (Vera Myrtle Colefax)

A Moruya girl who became a successful language teacher by Wendy Simes

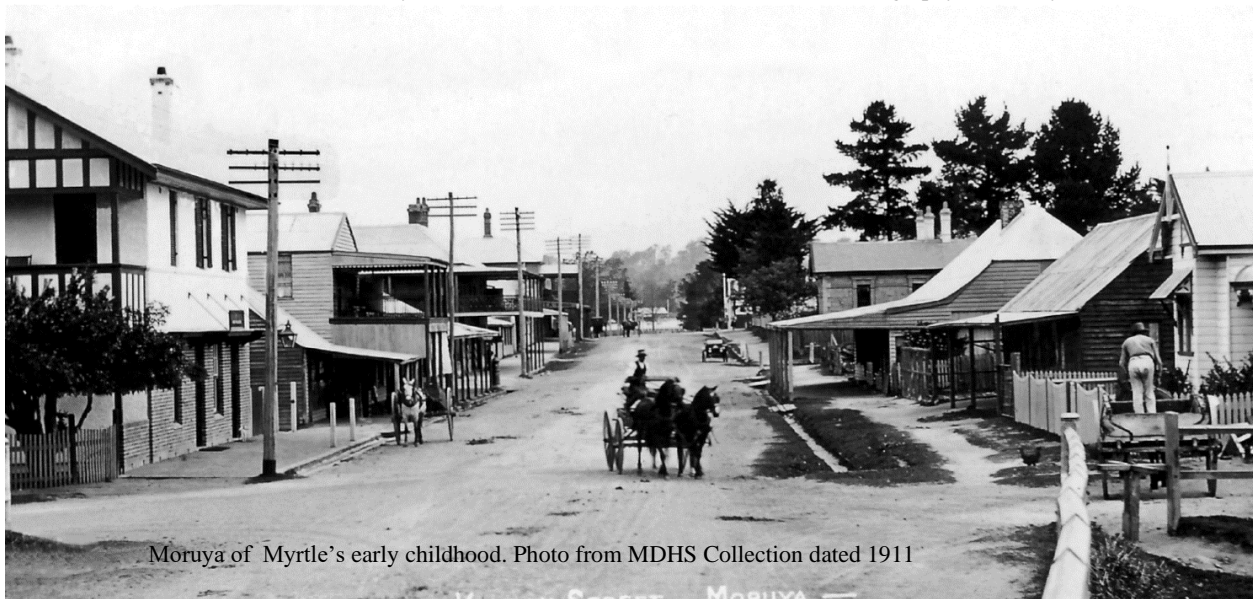
Vera Myrtle Colefax was born in Moruya on the 11th December 1903. Her parents were William Colefax and Alice Gadde who had met in the Salvation Army in Sydney but had returned to Moruya, William's home town, after they married. Here Myrtle grew up surrounded by the extended Colefax family. In 1903 Moruya was a town of approximately 800 people, a town where the children had a lot of freedom to roam and explore.

Myrtle has written her story of growing up in Moruya and the following information is taken from her narrative.

Every Sunday we walked into Moruya through the bush with Bob in the pram. At this stage she had one older sister Eve and a baby brother Aubrey Vernon (Bob). Mum knew the names of the birds, trees and insects. I suppose it rained sometimes but like the sundial I registered only the happy hours – I was going to write it in Latin but you might think me uppity! Grandma had a buggy and a sulky and there were so many who could have collected us and driven us home – but no – we trudged along through the bush and went home in the dark. Sometimes Dad used to come on his horse.



Myrtle with brother Gordon 1907. From An Autobiography of Aubrey Verner "Bob" Colefax.



Moruya of Myrtle's early childhood. Photo from MDHS Collection dated 1911

I remember our house very well – it was bare – no floor coverings and the floors were always scrubbed with caustic soda. I remember one night Mum was serving the evening meal and dad was sitting by the fire with infant Bob on his knee, singing, and I was standing against him. Suddenly Bob sat up and pushed me. I landed with my elbows on the blazing stove – I still have the scars! Another time I was sitting at the top of the back stone steps and Bob, who was crawling, pushed me and I fell to the bottom cutting the corner of my eye – I still have that scar too. That was the last time he attacked me!! (Presumably she got even with Bob, but in his reminiscences Bob recalls an event when he and Myrtle were on their way home from school for lunch, which illustrates close family loyalty.) A boy called Fred Coppin, who was much bigger than myself, began calling me rude names. I picked up an oversize pat of cow dung and let him have it. As he rushed at me with murder in his eyes Myrt stepped between us and fetched him a punch with precipitated him on the broad of his back!! Needless to say, after this embarrassing experience he elected to leave me alone.

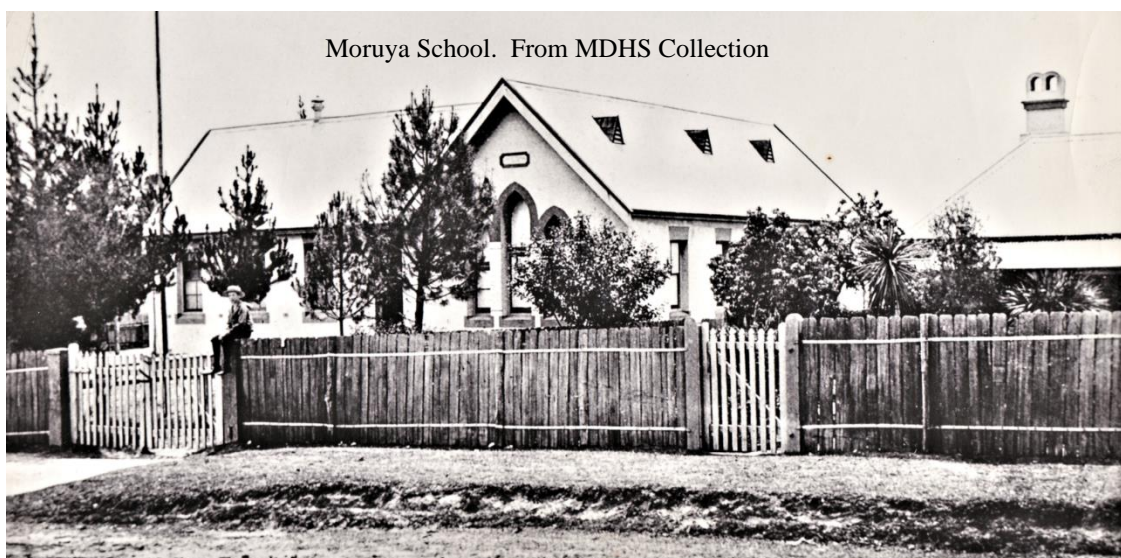
Both her parents were eager for their children to have the advantages of the best education they could provide and to this end both worked hard and saved. But Myrtle did observe that it was not really a happy home she says - *I was vaguely aware that it was not a happy home. I remember Mum weeping a lot. Dad and Mum had both been in the Salvation Army which had weird ideas of sin. All human weaknesses were sins and Dad was a Salvation Army tyrant. He was angry when Mum wanted to put lace on a petticoat. She was reprimanded for all kinds of trifles.*

Her father had various jobs and at one stage they were dairy farming before moving into town at Gundry.

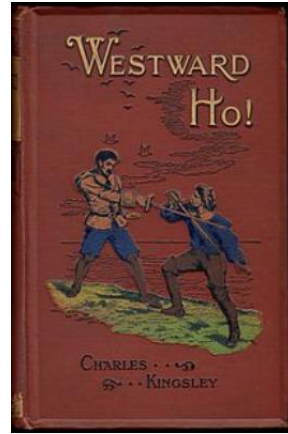
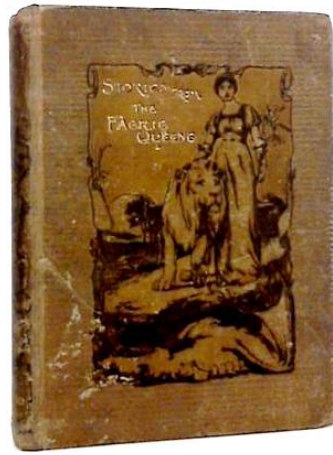
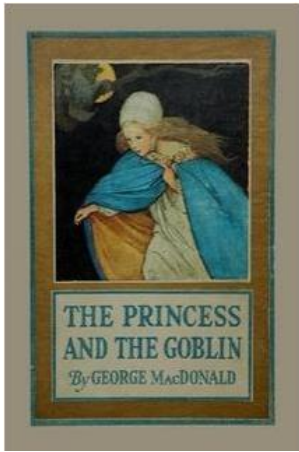
The dairy farm continued with its ups and downs but we children were unaware of the hardships that beset Mum and Dad. We were happy with the best possible food produced by the marvelous garden and orchard and Mum's superb cooking. There was always a full pantry. We were well dressed because of her skill with sewing. It never dawned on us that we were a poor family and that our parents slaved for us. Dad, who was clever with figures and had beautiful handwriting, did clerical work at night and Mum sewed far into the night by candle light, making small dresses for which there was a great demand...Another of her skills was with a polishing iron. The Masonic Lodge was a popular institution and the members wore stiff and starched shirt fronts. I don't know how it became known that Mum could do these collars and shirt fronts but every Lodge meeting she had this awful chore – my opinion. No electricity – only a fuel stove and Mrs Potts' irons – heavy exhausting work in a hot kitchen. Fortunately the polishing iron was small and not as weighty as the ordinary irons.

Myrtle describes how the children enjoyed the farm life, accepting and enjoying their large extended family and enjoying the normal events of a small country town such as the annual show and the enjoyment got from reading all the catalogues which came in the mail from places like Anthony Hordens, Grace Bros and Yates.

She goes on to say –*Generally speaking we had an uneventful but happy childhood. We enjoyed school and were contented at home. Eve and I were trained early to help in the house. We had to make beds and wash dishes before school and prepare vegetable for meals at the weekend. A hated chore at the weekend was polishing knives – we had a board with some kind of surface on which we sprinkled a nasty smelling powder and stropped the knives. I never could think why. We also swept and dusted and put flowers in the vases and did our share of minding the baby.*



The teacher who made a big difference in their enjoyment of school was Mr Egan. She says – *he made each subject attractive – even maths. He set about teaching us algebra which I found fascinating. It was in English that he influenced us most – he created an interest and a love of Shakespeare and Dickens – an incalculable boon. Remember she is talking about Primary school, High school in Sydney was yet to come. At the end of 1913 I sat for the Q.C. exam. There were bursaries for country children whose exam results were high enough, which entitled them to city High School tuition with an allowance for board and books. I won a bursary to Sydney's premier school, Sydney Girl's High. The bursary system had been brought in by the Labour government of Andrew Fisher which was enough to make Myrtle a dedicated Labourite.*



We had quite a good school library which provided me with one of life's joys, the Curdie books, and my favourite book which was *Westward Ho*. From various sources I had been drawn into the magic of King Arthur and Alice and one of our beloved books was an

illustrated version of *Tales From The Faerie*

Queen. And so we met Diamond, Armond and Trimond – also Florimal and snow white palfrey. I don't think there is ever a time when Bob and I meet that we fail to recall Florimal. I decided at a very early age that I'd read through the Bible but at that time I didn't get past Exodus.

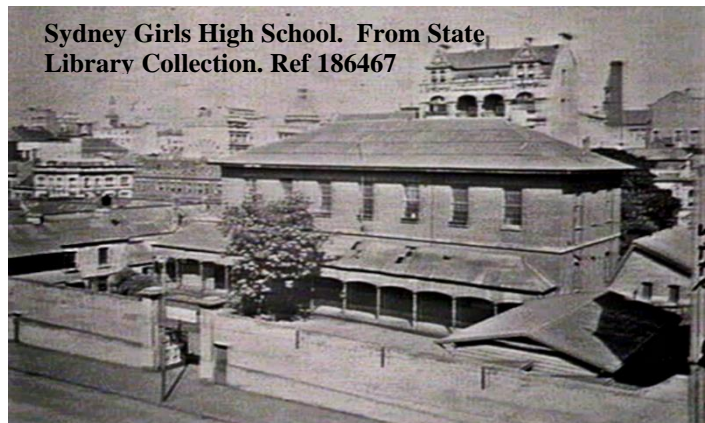


Myrtle 1919

In 1914 at the outbreak of war Myrtle moved to Sydney and boarded with Mrs Lennard a childhood friend of her father's. The children from Moruya which later included her brothers Bob and Gordon would return home for the school holidays travelling on the coastal steamers. At the time she attended Sydney Girls High School it was located in the centre of town in Elizabeth Street on the David Jones Site.

She did well at school and from there went on to study Arts at Sydney University doing French, Latin, English and Philosophy, also in 1921 published results she is recorded as

receiving a High Distinction in Oriental Studies. She obtained her B.A, and Dip. Ed.



Sydney Girls High School. From State Library Collection. Ref 186467

She spent the three months before starting University at home, she joined the local tennis club though says she was quite hopeless and spent her time with a local group of friends going to dances and picnics. During her University years she continued to come home at the Christmas vacation.

It was during these University years that Myrtle met Richard Thew whom she would eventually marry.

Lismore High School 1920's from
www.revolvy.com/page/Lismore-High-School



Her first teaching appointment was at Lismore High School.

The cheapest mode of transport at the time was via the Coastal Steamer to Byron Bay. She describes it as the worst sea trip she had ever had. *There was no harbour only a pier going far out to sea. We struck terrible weather all the way up the coast and arriving at Byron Bay had to anchor out to sea lashed by gale force winds for nearly two days. I was so ill I was delirious and my only wish was that the ship would sink.* When the

storm subsided they were winched off the boat in a basket. With her friend met on the journey, she travelled on the train to Lismore getting a horse cab to their accommodation which her friend Miss Butler had been able to arrange for her. Here she was to stay for what she calls 3 marvelous years making lifelong friends and always eagerly looking forward to Richard's regular letters. *In 1924 Richard suggested that as his holidays were due*

we should go to Coolangatta for a week. We set off with the blessing of our mothers and in my country innocence it didn't occur to me that there was such a thing as proprietary to be considered. The weather was perfect and we spent the time walking, swimming and reading on the beach. In the evenings Dick used to play the piano and sing lovely ballads from his extensive repertoire. Some of the girls told us when we were leaving they sat up every night to see if Dick left his room upstairs to come and spend the night downstairs. Of course they were very disappointed.

She enjoyed her three years in Lismore, with her next placement being Wollongong High School from where she was able to spend each weekend with Richard and his family at Carlton.

One of her first purchases when she started earning was a Piano for her mother. Her mother was overwhelmed but her father did not approve as it was on time payment. At Christmas 1924 Richard to whom she was then engaged came down to Moruya to meet the rest of the family – she says – *I was anxious to see the impact of his charisma on the family, and I was more than gratified – the spell lasted for the rest of our lives.*



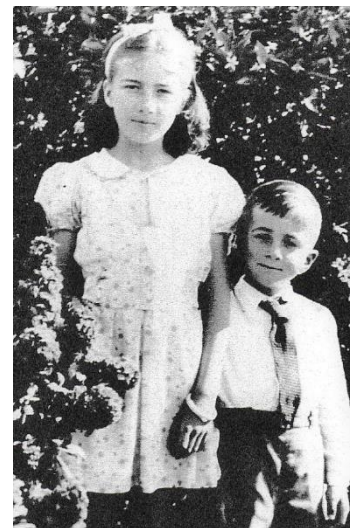
Richard and Myrtle were married on the 3rd of April 1926 at Rockdale Congregational Church. The newspaper announcement records him as Richard Gordon Thew of Beale and Co. which were a large piano manufacturer. Richard was a fine musician often mentioned in the newspaper as the accompanist, he was also a singing teacher and conductor. His name appears as the conductor of many coral events and as an adjudicator at eisteddfods around Australia. He was born in 1900 in Sydney, the eldest child of Clarence Thew and Anna Playford.

After her marriage Myrtle transferred to Cleveland Street Girls High where she served out her teaching bond.

She and Richard enjoyed 4 trips to Europe, *always involving music*, so she would have had many chances to use her language skills. Apart from Europe her travels included Bangkok, Hong Kong and Ceylon, but one trip she found memorable was a trip to Nauru where Richard was invited to organize an Eisteddfod. She travelled to Nauru on a Phosphate Ship with the return journey being delayed a week due to bad weather, much to the delight of the Nauru children returning to boarding school in Australia.

Myrtle and Richard had two children Beverley born in May 1929 and Kerry in September 1931. Beverley married Gordon Blake Slayter Roden in 1952.

Richard Thew who had received an MBE in 1968 for services to music died in May 1981. His obituary in the Sydney Morning Herald of the 3rd of June 1981 indicates that daughter Beverley and her husband and Kerry and his wife Margaret had between them 6 children, Anthony, Meredith, Richard, Elizabeth, David and Peter.



Myrtle like her brother Bob lived into her 90's dying in August 1998. Both she and Bob left Moruya the legacy of their childhood memories which have always proved invaluable for any research into Moruya at the beginning of the 20th century.

References:

Myrtles Story by Vera Myrtle Thew. (Unpublished)

An Autobiography by Aubrey Verner "Bob" Colefax. (Unpublished)