

CROW - BOX 3 - 3/10 - 0009

A Tribute to Doris McRae.

1893 to 1988

A Life Dedicated to Peace and Social Justice

By Ruth Crow

When Doris McRae died in her 96th year on October 9th this year, a friend, Margaret McGarvin Rea, paid the following Tribute to her in the columns of the Age.

"Doris McRae was a woman who knew peace and human rights could be achieved throughout the world. She never ceased to play her part. She will be greatly missed."

When Doris was ninety she wrote some notes about her early childhood, her training as a teacher, her life as a secondary teacher during the first half of this century and her participation in community movements for peace and for a better life for women. These notes have been supplemented by tapes of talks I had with Doris during 1983.

Neighbours in Pakenham.

When Doris cut her cake at her ninetieth birthday she said :-

"I guess that if somebody had told my parents, or any of our neighbours, on the day I was born, that I would live to my ninetieth birthday, they would never have believed it. My mother was in unassisted labour that was prolonged over three days. The house had a corrugated iron roof, and it was in the middle of a heat-wave. My mother was so ill that no-one paid any attention to the baby as they thought that I was dead until somebody saw me move."

It is significant that Doris, automatically, recalled that the neighbours were interested in her birth; whenever she talked about her early life the word 'neighbours' was frequently bracketted or substituted for the word 'family'. For example :-

"When news came to the post-office that I had won a scholarship to go to high school in Melbourne there was such excitement amongst our neighbours. It is hard to believe today how important it seemed to everyone to actually know some person who had a chance of going to a high school. They really rejoiced over matters which today would seem only private family concerns," she explained.

Doris spent her childhood at Pakenham where shopkeepers and farming neighbours were battling hard to make ends meet after the drastic depression of the eighteen nineties.

Most of Doris's early memories were about happy occasions, but when prompted she said that she supposed there were some shared sorrows. The family's network of friends and relations seemed to stretch to the foothills of the eastern slopes of the Dandenongs, across to Beaconsfield and to Nar Nar Goon. There

were also frequent letters from relations in other parts of Victoria.

The Exhilaration of Education

Doris was eight years old in 1901 when the six colonies were federated. This was a period of considerable optimism. The stark poverty of the 1890s was beginning to recede. At the Federal level the new government legislation for a 'people's Bank' and for age pensions had been passed. The Labour Party was developing from an embryonic trade union organisation to a political party with branches in many localities. In Victoria a new Education Act was past.

"Emphasis was now laid on the creative, rather than on the formal side of education, and from 1902 the education system in Victoria became permeated with plans for reform, progress and perfectability." (footnote 1)

There were some who opposed the 'extravagance' of the new curriculum but the popular movement around education tried to silence such criticism not only by debate but also by educational displays. These exhibitions were held in large country centres and in 1906 an exhibition of school work was held for a fortnight in the Exhibition Building.

"In 1905 there was a school paper account of a State Secondary School opening in Melbourne for ordinary citizens. Up to that time secondary education was only available to those whose parents could afford fees at private or church schools. This new school was the brain-child of Mr Frank Tate, the Director of Education, who persuaded the Victorian Government to open a Continuation School, this was the first high school in Melbourne," Doris said.

Doris vividly recalled the excitement of winning an opportunity for secondary education :-

"In December 1907 I sat for the entrance examination to this new school, but came away sure that I would fail; but, in January, when the Pakenham State School re-opened I met my teacher at the school gate. She said 'You have won a scholarship ! Would you like to run home and tell your mother the good news ?' WOULD I ! I ran all the way to be greeted with : 'We know and your sister has gone down the street where they are all agog, at the bakers shop and the bootmakers shop.' While we were all talking excitedly the grocer's boy arrived on his bicycle, pulling up at the verandah posts, almost panting with excitement. People dropped in all the afternoon and evening rejoicing that we had good fortune at last. I even got some telegrams from relations in the Wimmera."

The family then had to face the problem of arranging for Doris

to live in Melbourne during the school terms.

"Fortunately my uncle offered to take me into his home for two years. We bought a few clothes at the summer sales (no school uniforms were required then) with the money I had earned by cleaning the local church hall every Saturday for fifteen shillings a quarter. So I became a student at a State High School when they were just beginning. A completely new life opened out for me, so new that I did not realise how absurd it was to take a slate to school with me ! At Pakenham State School we were still using slates !" Doris reminisced.

Symbolic of the enthusiasm for this new period in state school education was the phrase used by the first Director of the Melbourne Teachers College, Dr Smyth. He described the Diploma of Education as a recognition that a teacher was capable of 'blazing a professional trail of his/her own'. (footnote 2)

Doris's enthusiastic description of this new movement around secondary education is backed up by the following quote from D.H. Rankin :-

"The Secondary Education Act was almost as momentous in results as the Act of 1872..... the step was consistent with an educated democracy; the movement was withdrawing higher education from the monopoly of public and private schools, the exclusive social group was to be deprived of its privilege.... secondary education was to become a popular movement." (footnote 3)

The McRae family had to sell a cow to raise the necessary money to pay for books and examination fees. Doris remembered this family sacrifice which raised two pounds ten shillings.

In 1910, when she had finished her secondary education in Melbourne, Doris came back to Pakenham to be a Student Teacher at her former primary school on the "good" salary of 50 pounds a year. she had won a studentship to Teachers College but did not expect to take it up. However in 1912 she 'had a shot at' the Senior Public examination and was able to enter the Arts course at Melbourne University on an allowance of twelve shillings and sixpence a week. That year the McRae family moved to Melbourne.

A Student During the First World War

Before the outbreak of the war Doris joined the University Student Christian Movement. At the weekly meetings the students discussed the failings of the Empire and the oppression of colonial people. She dates that time as the beginning of her political education. She also joined the Student Peace Group which took a largely pacifist stance.

"The men vowed to be conscientious objectors in the event

of war which seemed a remote possibility, although we had grave misgivings about the building of the dreadnoughts and the growth of the army. But, on the declaration of war, the seemingly most deeply committed opponents of war were among the first to don khaki." Doris remembered.

She said that the war hit teachers very hard, and that the casualty lists from Gallipoli and Flanders were studded with names of men she knew, 'so many of the best young thinkers were killed'. (footnote 4)

"I continued to be against the war and my family thought I verged on disloyalty. I believed then, and believe now, that many of the young men enlisted not only because they wanted to be heroes, but also because of the widespread idea that when the fighting was over the only men who would get work would be the ex-soldiers. The young men who held these views did not foresee the years of unemployment that blasted so many lives in the 1920s and 1930s," she recalled with sadness.

She vividly remembered the fierce and bitter family debates against conscription and the blind nationalism and racism which dominated country towns:-

"I was teaching in Echuca when I first became aware of the conscription issue. Women were being told that conscription would mean a quicker end to the war and that if the war continued all young Australian men would be killed and there would only be 'Abos.' to marry ! ? To be against conscription was synonymous with disloyalty and even subversion."

The McRae family voted against conscription, not because of Doris's persuasions, but because her brother, a soldier on the big guns in France settled the matter for them.

"Don't vote 'YES'. None of the men want to be called conscripts, we are all volunteers !" he wrote.

After the war, in 1920, Doris was teaching at Bairnsdale High School where she met Mr W.L.F. Wannan :- (footnote 5)

"William Wannan was a teacher who stood almost alone against conscription in that very conservative town. He was socially ostracised for some time, and he and his wife had a torrid time. From him I got the rudiments of socialism. It was all new to me.

"He introduced me to the Free Religious Fellowship and through this organisation I met such people as Doris and Maurice Blackburn, Kath Singleton, Dick Long, Alan Villiers, Netty and Vance Palmer, Louis Esson and Hilda Bull. We discussed socialist ideas and we entertained each other with plays, music, poetry and drama. We were a lively bunch of young people !" (footnote 6)

Most of Doris's early teaching appointments were to country schools : Echuca, Bairnsdale, Castlemaine, Hamilton and Horsham.

Until her mother died in 1924 she sent her mother one pound a week even though she had to pay her board in the town where she was teaching, so she had very little income. She explained that there was a general assumption, in those days, that single women from working class families (or lower middle class families) should accept financial responsibility for the family, including nephews, nieces, widowed sisters or unemployed brothers.

"The phrase, 'She helps at home' was taken for granted. It was expected and accepted that a person, particularly a woman, with a 'good job' would help the others who could not make ends meet," Doris wrote in her notes.

This meant that even after teaching 25 years she had very little money because women's wages were low and 'she had helped at home'.

Exchange Teaching and the 1930S Depression

During 1929 Doris taught as an exchange teacher at a small agricultural centre north-west of Aberdeen in Scotland. Through the League of Empire she was able to arrange trips to the continent in the school vacations. She included in her itinerary a visit to the League of Nations in Switzerland and a fortnight's summer school at Bonn University sharing learning experiences with students from twenty five nations.

Doris described her impressions of Europe at the end of the 1920s in the following words :-

"I was much impressed by the ardour of the Czechs for their new republic, and learned something from their history. When travelling down the Danube to Vienna I was distressed by the depressed state of the countryside.

In Germany I saw a demonstration of starving people, including women and children. I realised that there was great hatred of the Treaty of Versailles. It was during this part of my tour that I heard about the Depression that was developing in Australia."

Doris believed that the year abroad had intensified her social conscience. News of the Depression in Australia had reached her when she was travelling in Austria. When she returned to the Wimmera she found that many families in the Wimmera were facing great hardships. Horsham was no longer a prosperous town.

In the centenary year of 1934 she came to Melbourne to teach at Coburg High School and then, a couple of years later she was

appointed to Frankston High School.

The Victorian Teachers Union in the 30s and 40s

Living in Melbourne enabled Doris to be more actively involved in the Victorian Teachers Union (V.T.U.). It was during 1935 that she accepted the responsibility of becoming a Councillor of the Victorian Teachers Union and she was also able to participate in the Teachers Peace Group. She states :-

"I found the V.T.U. riddled with divisions: men versus women, primary teachers versus secondary teachers, town versus country and there were Masons and Catholics and also anti-semitic elements."

Doris worked hard to overcome these divisions. She described herself as an 'inveterate member of the V.T.U. Social Questions Committee'. Through this she became involved with issues such as malnutrition, child care, poverty and the need for child endowment. In 1940 there was an Enquiry on Child Endowment and Doris involved the V.T.U. in collecting evidence for this.

The V.T.U. Social Questions Committee held a number of well attended public meetings which were addressed by such prominent reformers as Dr John Dale (Health Officer for the Melbourne City Council) Mr Robert Gardner (one of the founders of the Oslo Health Lunch project which was sponsored by the Opportunity Clubs in Collingwood), and Mr Os. Barnett (who was very involved in campaigns around slum abolition). (footnote 7)

"Social questions were raised in a report each year at the V.T.U. Conference and this widened the perspectives of some teachers. The divisions between teachers were reduced when they came face to face with some of the social issues of the 30s. And, we were successful in some ways. For example, the part played by the V.T.U. in assisting the Mothers Clubs to win their campaign for free milk for school children. This greatly strengthened the bonds between these two organisations," Doris explained.

Commenting on the part played by Doris in the V.T.U. Alfrieda (Alvie) Booth has stated :-

"Her sincerity and humanity overcame many seemingly impossible barriers. She won great respect from everyone, even those who held different views from hers. Actions around teachers conditions were not the only issues that occupied Doris. Her interests extended to improving the lives of children and their parents and for peace." (footnote 8)

Teachers, Peace, and the Vancouver Conference

Doris helped to develop united campaigns between teachers in state schools and in the private schools through the Teachers

Peace Group which met in the V.T.U. offices. Describing this period Doris said :-

"Peace was on the agenda at V.T.U. conferences. During the 1930s the V.T.U. gave its blessing to a number of meetings called by the Teachers Peace Group and at one conference we passed a resolution for the dissolution of the cadet corps in high schools and a little later this was phased out."

When the Women's Pan Pacific Peace Conference was held in 1937 in Vancouver, Doris was nominated as a delegate by the V.T.U. and later her nomination was endorsed by the Australian Teachers Federation. Here is her description of this historic gathering.

"The conference met for about seven days and on the first day Mrs Stanley Vaughan spoke on behalf of the Australian delegation. She offended delegates from the Phillipines, Korea, China and Japan by strongly appealing for the English-speaking countries; Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States to join together. She was 'sent to Coventry' and I was elected as the leader of the Australian delegation. This meant that I was on the Steering Committee for the Conference and each evening I had to make the Australian summary at a large public forum."

Doris also described the dramatic situation when on the 'fateful day' of July 1937 Japan formally invaded China. There were delegates from both countries at Vancouver :-

"The Chinese Women were weeping and being comforted by the Japanese women. 'It is not the people who are fighting each other, but our governments', they said to each other."

While in Vancouver Doris met a Canadian woman who told her about the way the schools in BRITISH COLUMBIA were helping migrants to be proud of their own culture :-

"Immigration started much earlier in Canada than here and already, by the mid-thirties, there was a great variety of ethnic groups. I heard about community fairs which were held each year in the public gardens and how these were becoming an exchange of customs for eating, dancing and singing. Some of this is now going on in Australia, but such ideas were new to me then. When I came back to Australia I was able to tell some of the Education Department people about this way of helping migrant families."

After the Vancouver Conference Doris travelled across Canada. She was depressed by the barren country side with its unpainted houses. She explained that :-

"They were calling Canada 'the dust bowl'. The farmers were in a terrible position, whereas a few years before, as in

Horsham, they had been well-to-do farmers. I heard how the farmers had built co-operative silos that they planned to use as their own property, but when times were bad they had to sell them out to the big people whom they were trying to by-pass. That was another horrifying example of how society works".

Europe at End of the 1940s

Doris then travelled to Britian and arranged through the National Union of Teachers to visit the Children's Colony for Spanish refugees at Theydon Bois. This brought home to her the tragedy of the Spanish War.

Although she was nearly out of money she decided to visit the Soviet Union, travelling through Germany and Poland. She was very interested in seeing schools in the countries she visited. She found it difficult to compare the schools she saw with those she had taught at in Australia. This was particularly so in Russia where there had been such a high rate of illiteracy before the revolution. She thought that some education in some of the Soviet schools was a was a bit rigid but the Pioneer Palaces in Moscow 'were a little bit of heaven !'

On returning to Australia Doris addressed numerous meetings reporting back on the Vancouver Conference and on her trip through Europe. She also reported on her impressions of the various countries she visited, giving special attention to informing people about the innovations she had seen in both education and in providing for children's recreation. She warned about the danger of nazism and called for support for the Spanish Republican Government.

Doris was a very inspiring public speaker and on several occasions spoke to large rallies which packed the Princess Theatre. She was also a very courageous speaker and could present the case for peace from platforms where other speakers were totally opposed to her views (footnote 9)

Linking the School and the Community

In the early 1940s Doris was appointed principal at Flemington Girls School (now Debney Park High School). At that time there were fewer than a dozen women principals of Education Department schools. She was by then the vice-president of the Victorian Teachers Union.

Early in 1942 the V.T.U., and other organisations which had a large number of women members, formed a coalition called the 'Council for Women in War Work' and later in that year, through this group were able to establish the 'Committee for Co-ordinating Child Care in Wartime'. Doris was able to use her influence in the V.T.U. to help to ensure the effectiveness of these significant organisations. (footnote 10)

At the same time as being actively involved in general

campaigns to improve the lives of women and children, on the local level, at Flemington, Doris helped to put into practise some of the ideas that had been discussed at the Social Questions Committee of the V.T.U. (footnote 11)

Through involving local people, working with the parliamentary representatives for the area, and winning support from the Melbourne City Council, Doris was able to help establish a number of new types of community services in the Flemington/Kensington district. (footnote 11)

"When I was principal at Flemington Girls High I was most concerned about how the young girls spent their leisure time. The huge American Army Camp was just down the road at Camp Pell (Royal Park). Most of the families lived in very cramped homes. So we had a public meeting to discuss the need for some recreation centre for youth. Eventually we did establish a youth centre in the old Kensington Town Hall.

" I remember how Arthur Clarey (who later represented the Flemington/Kensington district in the Legislative Assembly) said how heartening it was to see so many citizens interested in a joint project. He hoped that this might be the beginning of developing a sense of local identity in the district," Doris explained.

The Deveney family of Kensington had a daughter at Flemington Girls when Doris was the principal.(footnote 12).

Lynette Deveney has some very vivid memories of the resurgence of interest in local activities in Flemington/Kensington in the 1940s. Here are some of her memories:-

"Miss McRae helped to form the Flemington-Kensington Progress Association. This brought together the residents and the shopkeepers to campaign for the removal of the tanneries from Debney's Paddock. In the 1960s these sprawling, smelly sheds were removed and we now have a large park, a community centre as well as hundreds of flats on the area. The park was only a dream in the 1940s."

"My daughter was on the Youth Centre Committee when she was still a school girl. Miss McRae helped so many young people to learn how to take responsibility for their own recreation."

Thelma Prior (Wade) describes the experiences of the Wade family when her sister, Janet, was a pupil at Flemington Girls in 1943. (footnote 13)

"Our family thought the world of Miss McRae. She took a real interest in Janet, and also in all the others of us in the family. She interested us all in what Janet was learning. I was a school girl in the 1930s when most of

the schools discouraged parents and older members of the family from even going into the school building, let alone being able to go right into the classrooms and to chat with the teachers.

"I can remember the time we all went to Flemington Girls on its 'Open Day', and also the school concerts which were held to raise money for the youth centre and for buying the equipment so that school meals could be served."

"Seeing the Historical Significance of Actions"

When Doris retired from the Education Department there was a number of tributes to her in the Victorian Teachers journal.

Helena McGarvin, who had often been an outspoken critic of some of Doris's policies, wrote :-

"I know of no member of the union who has done so much for teachers as has Miss McRae. She has never allowed her views to interfere with the work of the union. All teachers of Victoria owe to her for her work, a debt that cannot be easily repaid." (footnote 14)

In listening to Doris describing her life there seemed to be three main interests dominating her thoughts;

firstly, the need for a peaceful world.
secondly, the need for women to have a fuller life.
thirdly, the responsibility of the adult generation for bringing up children to be creative people who can contribute to society.

Since her retirement Doris has been involved in the peace movement, through the Campaign for International Co-operation and Disarmament (C.I.C.D.), and in the Women's Movement, through the Union of Australian Women (U.A.W.).

She was a foundation member of the Union of Australian Women in 1950 and helped in many ways to establish this organisation which was then, a new-type of Australian wide movement around improving the lives of women. She contributed to working out U.A.W. policy on women's rights, equal pay, economic justice and peace.

In her nineties she continued to help the U.A.W. by reading documents and summarising them for reproduction in the U.A.W. Newsletter. She helped the C.I.C.D in a similar way. It was entirely in character that she used the skills that were left to her to contribute according to her ability to the causes she held dear.

On her ninetieth birthday, on January 25, 1983, Doris was the guest of honour at a U.A.W. birthday picnic. Her well chosen words in response to the greetings of her friends are a fine example of her ability to strive to accept new movements even

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though some of the ideas and actions may have seemed strange to her; and her modesty which enabled her to be self-critical on this important public occasion. Here are her words :-

"When you are in the middle of a campaign it is not easy to see the historic significance of actions being taken, and hence there were times when the changing role of the women's movement did not immediately draw a response from me.....because of living so much alone I never seized on the depth of oppression that so many women suffer."

Significant Dates in Doris McRae's Life

- 1893 Born at Pakenham.
- 1907 Won scholarship to the Continuation High School.
- 1909 Passed Public Examination Board Exam.
- 1910 Student teacher at Pakenham State School.
- 1912 Won a scholarship to Melb. Uni.
- 1916 Teaching at Echuca High School.
- 1917 Teaching at Williamstown High School.
- 1920 Teaching at Bairnsdale High School.
- 1925 Teaching at Castlemaine High School.
- 1927 Teaching at Hamilton High School.
- 1928 Teaching at Horsham High School.
- 1929 Exchange Teacher at school in Scotland.
- 1929 Visited the League of Nations, travelled in Europe.
- 1931 Returned to teach at Horsham High School.
- 1934 Teaching at Courg High School
- 1935 Began to be very active in the Vic. Teachers Union.
- 1935 Helped the V.T.U. to form a Social Questions Cttee.
- 1936 Teaching at Frankston High School.
- 1936 Helped to found the Teachers Peace Group.
- 1937 Australian Teachers Federation Delegate to Pan Pacific Conference at Vancouver.
- 1942 Principal of Flemington Girls High School.
- 1950 Helped to found the Union of Australian Women.
- 1988 Died at aged 95.

Footnotes to Article on Doris McRae

1. From "The History of the Development of Education in Victoria 1836 to 1936 by D.H. Rankin M.A. published by Arrow Printery, Melbourne.

2. See footnote 1.

3. See footnote 1.

4. In Rankin's book (see 1 above) he writes :- "There were 2,297 male teachers and officials in the employ of the Education Department when war was proclaimed, August 1914. Of that number 1,500 were between the ages of 18 and 45, and of those 752 volunteers were accepted, 104 were rejected. More than 100 honours and decorations were secured by those enlisted, while 146 were either killed in action or died on the scene of warfare." (p. 169)

5. W.L.F. Wannan was later a teacher at University High School.

6. Later, both Maurice and Doris Blackburn were members of Federal Parliament; Kath Singleton was a well known feminist, a relation of the Dr Singleton who established the Singleton Clinic in Collingwood at the turn of the century; Dick Long was closely associated with the publication of the School Paper and grade Readers; Alan Villiers was a world famous yachtsman and writer about yachting; Vance Palmer was a novelist, and Netty Palmer was a contributor to many journals; Louis Esson wrote plays and his wife, Hilda Bull, was a doctor who worked for the Melbourne City Council in the 1920s and 1930s.

7. I (Ruth Crow) remember attending some of these meetings which were held in the V.T.U. rooms. One was on nutrition and children and the other on supervised playgrounds. I also collaborated with V.T.U. members in collecting material for the Select Enquiry on Child Endowment during 1939. See "Food and Health" by Marjorie Coppel, published by the Left Book Club 1940. I was not a teacher at that time, I attended as an interested member of the public.

8. Alfrieda Booth was a high school teacher who taught at Flemington Girls School when Doris McRae was the principal.

9. I (Ruth Crow) was present at an overflow, stormy meeting at the Brighton Town Hall in the Autumn of 1939 when Doris spoke from a platform putting forward a peace policy when the rest of the platform (including a Major General) were strongly advocating war. At previous, similar rallies, there had been 'basher gangs' to silence those who opposed war.

10) For more information on the Council for Women in War Work,

see the booklet "Australian Women at War", edited by Molly Bain, published by the Left Book Club, 1943. The Committee for Co-ordinating Child Care in Wartime succeeded in a campaign for Federal funding of child care. See article by Lynne Davis in the Australian Journal of Early Childhood, February 1987. These and other documents are available from Ruth Crow, 03.328.2345.

11) In addition to the examples cited in the text, at Flemington Girls School a healthy 'Oslo Meal' was available as a school lunch at a nominal charge; this was very innovative in the 1940s. Doris took a very personal interest in the child care initiatives of the Federal Government, for example she visited the Brunswick Centre (the first child care centre to be funded by the Federal Government).

12) The Deveney family of Kensington has had very long and strong connections with local community organisations and with the Melbourne City Council. The present M.C.C. Councillor, Bill Deveney, (elected to M.C.C. in 1982) is the great grandson of a former Melbourne City Councillor who was elected to the Melbourne City Council in 1905.

13. Thelma Prior is a member of the Union of Australian Women.

14. Helena McGarvin was the aunt of Margaret McGarvin Rae whose tribute to Doris McRae is quoted at the beginning of this article.

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October, 1900.
memories of family times shared.
— The Barnes family.

McRAE, Doris Mary. — On October
9, 1988. Daughter of Donald and
Mary Jane, sister of Nellie and
Doug (all dec).
In her 96th year
The end of an era
Loved aunt of Joan and Terry
O'Brien, great-aunt of Gill and Jim
Griffin, Brad and Judy O'Brien and
Kaye and their children, Matthew,
Michael, Daniel and Katie.
Loved aunt of Ruth and Ken
Bulbit, great-aunt of Laurie and
Marion Bulbit, Diane and Paul
Black and Clifford.
Aunt of Douglas McRae (Qld).
A woman of great spirit and bril-
liant mind, who was a tireless
worker for world peace and wom-
en's rights. She will be greatly
missed by her family and friends.
Our thanks to Hurlingham for
their care.
A memorial service is being ar-
ranged. See later papers.

McRAE, Doris. — October 9th,
aged 95 years. Foundation
Member Union of Australian
Women. Lifelong worker for
peace, education and womens
rights. Watch for notice for
Memorial Gathering.

Age 10/10/88

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