



Butters' Centre in 1985.

Her last home was the Pleasant Rest Nursing Home at Orignal. She died on June 3, 1980, a few months after being admitted.

Her remains were brought back to Magog, where the funeral service was held in the presence of her four children, ten grandchildren and seventeen great-grandchildren. Friends and many employees followed the funeral procession to the *East Bolton Cemetery* in Austin. In her final resting place, she rejoined her husband, John, and Cecil, her beloved son.

We can still visit her tombstone or see the place where this love story unfolded. Here, in Austin, a woman loved handicapped and abandoned children so much that she founded a hospital for them, and gave her life to caring for them.

That is Lily Esther Butters' story.

Françoise Hamel-Beaudoin
Austin 2005



Commemorative plaque at the Butters' Centre.

Thanks:

The Austin Cultural Committee thanks Mrs Françoise Hamel-Beaudoin for her generous collaboration in the publication of this document.

The Committee also wishes to thank the Municipality of Austin for its financial support.

ISBN 2-923381-01-7

Legal deposit - Bibliothèque nationale du Québec, 2005

Legal deposit - Library and Archives Canada, 2005

Produced by the Cultural Committee of Austin, Mai 2005

Design: www.comma.ca

Printing: M. Leblanc Imprimerie

AUSTIN

Born to Love

Lily Esther Butters

Abridgement of the Biography
of Lily Esther Butters (1894-1980)
by Françoise Hamel-Beaudoin.



Lily Esther Butters was at the heart of an extraordinary adventure that played out in Austin in the Eastern Townships. She was born on March 5, 1894 in Newcastle, England, and there was no indication that her life would be in any way different from that of her brothers and sisters.



Lily Esther Butters

As a young woman from Yorkshire, she married John William Butters at Southbank, on August 1, 1914. When the First World War loomed, he enrolled in the Northumberland Fusiliers regiment. Upon his return, in 1918, the couple already had a son, christened James Atkins. They wondered what would become of their family given that Great Britain was having such a hard time getting back on its feet in the post-war years. Also there was famine. They began to entertain the idea of expatriating themselves.

Canada was considered an ideal place to rebuild a life and raise a large family. Fortunately, the Butters were in the «chosen» category, a status reserved for citizens of Great Britain and the United States. Furthermore, John was eligible for a federal government program administered by the Soldier Settlement Board.

So, on May 20, 1929, the Butters landed in Quebec. The Board in charge of their arrival gave them land in Austin. They didn't know a thing about the area, and at times imagined that they might have to sleep in an Indian tent. Fortune favoured them: a real home



Lily, John and James Atkins in 1915

was waiting. From the earliest days, Lily, the canny housewife, organized the family's life. John, for his part, soon sought the advice of his neighbours, who suggested that he buy a horse, a carriage and five Jersey cows.

The Butters, who came to Canada to flee poverty, witnessed the collapse of the New York Stock Exchange on October 29, 1929. America and the entire world were in a state of crisis: it was the Great Depression. To earn their living, Lily and John offered their services to the families in the vicinity and to people in Magog. Norman, John's brother who had emigrated with them, worked for farmers in the village. The years passed, and the Butters saw their children grow. Lily and John eked out a living, but they nevertheless enjoyed a genuine peace until war broke out again, in 1939. The following year was a memorable one for the family. James, the oldest son, married Janet Paton, a Scot

from Magog. Their marriage took place on September 11. The youngest son, John H., known as Jack, enlisted in the navy on January 28, 1941 while Cecil, the second son, enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force on July 28 the same year. And Norman married Alice Nobel, they went to live in Oshawa, Ontario.

Lily and her daughter Mary played their part in the war effort, working in the munitions factories. As several of their co-workers joined the army, Lily felt a bit envious. So, at the end of 1941, she enlisted in the Canadian Women's Army Corps and was processed on January 2, 1942, in Montreal, at the Shaughnessy barracks while her husband found a job as a janitor there.

The Butters then had to deal with the death of their son Cecil on June 29, 1943. The young airman had fractured the humerus in his left arm at the military camp at St. Jean while trying to start the propeller of a plane. He was operated on in Ste. Anne de Bellevue, but could not be revived after the surgery.

From that day on, Lily Butters' health deteriorated. She asked for and obtained her discharge from the army on March 23, 1944. To come to terms with her sorrow, she began to think of a dream she had had since childhood – to build a hospital for mentally handicapped children. To do this, she enrolled in a class for nursing assistants (probably at the Queen Elisabeth Hospital) before leaving Montreal. When her course ended, she returned to Austin for good.

Again the Butters benefited from federal government assistance. The Veterans' Land Act allowed them to renovate their home.

Once the repairs were finished, Lily put advertisements in the newspapers. She invited convalescents and elderly people to come and live with her. Several people responded, but she quickly became disenchanted with this clientele. Just as she was wondering if she had mistaken her vocation, she received a call from a social worker at the Jewish Welfare Agency in Montreal, asking if she could take care of a child that had been abandoned. This was what she had been waiting for, and she immediately found alternative housing in Magog for her lodgers.

The first child was to be followed by eight orphans that first year. Little by little, her dream came true. At her hospital, which she named the **Cecil Butters Memorial Hospital** in honour of her son Cecil, she housed twelve patients in 1948. The house they had obtained back in 1929 was a century old. Many renovations were made, but Lily kept doing the same thing: she accepted more children than she had room for and continually needed to enlarge the house. No sooner was the work finished then the problems started again because she could not turn away a handicapped person.

In 1951, Lily gave the name **Blue Girls** to the young women who were given into her care by the courts or by their parents. Two of these came from the Child Services Centre in Montreal. They were dressed all in blue and cared for and fed without charge. According to Lily, these young women had an



On January 21, 1963, *La Tribune* (Sherbrooke's French-language daily) revealed an astonishing fact. Twenty young Indians and Eskimos born in the Northwest Territories were being housed at the Cecil Butters Memorial Hospital. Besides being physically and mentally handicapped, some were also bedridden. To accommodate the arrival of these babies, beds had to be pushed closer together.

In 1963, John, Lily's husband, found himself in poor health, and X-rays showed he had intestinal cancer. He spent his last few months



Lily with one of the children she so lovingly care for.

This was her hour of disillusionment. In 1971, the Quebec government passed the **Health and Social Services Act**. In Quebec at that time, handicapped persons were not considered as individuals in their own right. This philosophy was beginning to change. Until 1960, mentally handicapped persons were grouped according to three categories: idiocy, imbecility and debility. This classification meant nothing to Lily, for whom all those without hope were loved and accepted. The hospital took in persons suffering from hydrocephaly, microcephaly and spina-bifida, all condemned to a few weeks of life. She knew their condition but tried to save them. According to the people working for the Department of Social Affairs, her hospital should not have held more than 166 patients, but she had taken in 435. Solutions had to be found. To reach the desired number, it was suggested to her that the handicapped persons be sent back to the region where they were born. The hospital's board of directors preferred to try to place the residents in other hospitals. This was the beginning of lengthy negotiations with the government to find solutions to the overcrowding.

Added to these worries was the arrival of a union to which Lily was fiercely opposed. Even the employees were divided about whether such an association was necessary. After a bitter fight that lasted many months, the director was forced to sign a first collective agreement in 1972.

One happy event helped her to forget for a time the difficulties of the last months. She was nominated for and received the Order of Canada. The ceremony, with all its pomp and splendour, took place on October 25, 1972. Lily was accompanied by her children Mary and John.

On April 7, 1974, the hospital's board of directors met in Lily's absence. The members had been made aware of a requirement of the Department of Social Affaires obliging executive directors to retire at the age of 67. Lily Butters was 80! They voted unanimously in favour of discharging her. Informed of this decision by way of a letter from the director, she was left with no choice but to leave the institution, undoubtedly a blow to her very soul. At the same meeting, the position of director was offered to her daughter Mary, who accepted it.

IQ between 50 and 75. She considered this to be higher than that of mentally handicapped persons, but not sufficient for them to be able to cope in the workplace.

Mary, the daughter of Lily, together with her husband Holger Madsen, and James, the oldest son, with his wife Janet assisted their mother in her work. That same year, Lily's sister, Lavinia Hudson, also arrived; her help was all the more valuable in that she was a nurse and held a diploma in obstetrics. In the fall of 1953, Lily hired two people from the Netherlands, John Visser and Gerret Vandermark. They were the first foreigners to join the staff. On May 16, 1961, there were 275 people being cared for. That spring, an outbreak of measles raged through the hospital. It was a crisis. Fifty children fell sick and twenty of them died within five weeks. The newspapers got hold of the story and blamed the director, Lily Butters, for these deaths. There was even talk of holding an inquiry. A civil servant in the Health Department and the Member of Parliament for the riding joined forces to defend the Butters. Fortunately, things calmed down and Lily Butters was able to continue her work in peace.

However, she had not been able to solve the problem of water, a problem which had plagued them from the very beginning. She had had wells dug, but each time, the new well drained the old one, and ran dry. To meet their daily requirements, they sometimes had to bring in water by tanker trucks from Magog. To deal with these problems, fundraising was undertaken, but it was only partly successful. They needed \$742,000 and were able to raise only \$230,671. For one thing, the expenses to launch the campaign had been exorbitant. They did nevertheless manage to meet their initial goal: to get their water from Lake Memphremagog and to pump it to a reservoir on the hill overlooking the hospital. One of the objectives of the fund-raising campaign was to build a structure to reduce overcrowding. There was no question of doing this at this point, however, for there was no money.



Lily Esther Butters with her staff.

in the house that Lily had built for their retirement. His failing health did not stop the work that could no longer be postponed. A waterworks was built and a fire protection system installed.

John died at home on February 2, 1964. Despite her sorrow, Lily had to continue her work. In 1966, she had 417 children to care for. She was supported by her brother James and his wife Muriel, who joined the team in 1967. They were there in time to witness the realization of a project dear to the director's heart: the construction of a new building. Senator Desruisseaux and his friends had organized a fundraising campaign. They raised the \$230,000 needed for the construction of the building that Lily Butters called the **Pavilion**. A number of residents could be housed there, which helped ease overcrowding in the main building.

In February, 1971, Lily went to Magog with her son-in-law, Holger Madsen, to get the employees pay, in cash. On their return, masked bandits blocked the road. They knew that Lily had a sum of \$25,000, and demanded that it be turned over to them. Fearing for her life, she complied. To this date, this crime has never been solved.



Lily receiving the Order of Canada.

Lily then took up residence at the property where her husband John died. The first year of her retirement passed, but the restful retirement she had earned was denied her. She suffered from Alzheimer's and her life slowly began to deteriorate. Her oldest daughter Esther took her to live with her in Dalkeith, Ontario. This worked out for a time, but as the illness progressed, Lily needed specialized care. She was placed in a residence for the elderly with decreasing independence.