The testing of Beth Vickers-Willis

By CATHRYN DONALD

Her famous husband was paralysed, her three children born disfigured, but she's won through.

WINTERING in the sun at Caloundra, a small beach resort seventy-three miles north of Brisbane, are a pretty little Melbourne woman, her husband, and their three small children. Hot-house tourists who just can't take the southern freeze? Not a bit of it.

Ten thousand square dancers in Melbourne, Adelaide and Sydney wore holes in their dancing pumps to raise the £1000 that is making it possible for the Vickers-Willis family to spend three months in the Queensland sunshine, curing a collection of tragic scars.

For Jim Vickers-Willis, thirty-five-year-old square dance caller with world-wide fame, film-star looks, and a film-star following of 200,000 fans, the "scars" are legs and arms still partially paralysed from an attack of polio fifteen months ago.

For the children, Suellen, six-and-a-half years, Peter, four, and baby Tony, ten months, the scars are real ones, where surgeons have re-shaped badly disfigured lips.

Beth's "scars" are less obvious, but perhaps more tragic . . . a network of premature worry lines round her beautiful brown eyes.

As Jim Vickers-Willis says: "Beth's had a far worse bashing about than we have. *She's* the one who needs a holiday most!" And he's quite right.

In the past eight years, Beth has helped her husband make square dancing an Australian-wide craze — a craze which has emptied picture theatres and conventional ballrooms, and packed halls instead, particularly in Melbourne and Adelaide, with five thousand square dancers five or six nights a week.

She has helped Jim become one of the world's top callers, and taught herself to be one of Australia's best square dancers.

At the peak of their success, she saw her husband nearly die from polio and spend months in an iron lung, then brought him home and helped him walk again when doctors had given him up.

But few people know she has had to cope with another tragedy. Beth Vickers-Willis has seen each of her children born with a facial disfigurement—hare lips.

Suellen (Suzie), who had double hare lips, has had five corrective operations. Peter has had two operations. Even baby Tony, born while Jim was critically ill, hasn't been spared. Though not as badly affected as the others, he too has had to have one operation.

In spite of all this, when the band strikes up "Alabama Jubilee" or "Oh Johnny," Beth's dancing feet flicker away as if she hadn't a care in the world.

Except for the wrinkles round her eyes, she shows no signs—mentally or physically—of what she has been through.

Though she's in her late twenties, with her pointed chin and shoulder-length brown hair, she still looks like a schoolgirl. Her husband calls her "The Mighty Atom."

"Swing your partners," Jim Vickers-Willis calls to one thousand dancers who gave a benefit dance for him at Sydney Town Hall on his way north to convalesce from polio. He still can't use his left arm.

"She's as strong as they come," he says with a grin. "Though she's only five-feet-two, she can toss my six-feet-one around like a baby. And she often has to," he adds matter-of-factly.

Jim went into an iron lung fifteen months ago, completely paralysed. With Beth's help, he has miraculously recovered most of the use of his legs and right arm, though his left arm is competely useless.

"I can shave and feed myself, but Beth still has to do many other things for me, including bathing me and helping me to dress," he says.

Doctors said he would never walk again. But he is—holding Beth's hand.

"We seem to have spent our lives holding hands," Beth laughs. "We started within a minute of the time we first met!"

That was eight years ago, when Beth was a nurse in a Collins Street dentist's surgery, and Jim, a Melbourne journalist, was a patient.

"Actually, he wasn't all that bad as a patient," Beth says. "But the dentist I worked for was a bit of a tease. He liked to have one blonde nurse, and one brunette (me) hold the men patient's hands. It was terribly embarrassing for the nurses."

Jim wasn't discouraged

So embarrassing that Beth fiddled around washing her hands with antiseptic so she wouldn't have to hold Jim's hand. But it didn't work . . . That night the patient rang her up at home and asked her to go out with him. She went. By the following Christmas they were engaged, and the following October they were married.

After spending six months in Sydney, they went back to Melbourne to build their own modern white home at Brighton. Beth designed it herself. She insisted on an extra large kitchen. "I must have had premonitions of the days when I'd be serving lunch to forty or fifty square dance callers for whom Jim was holding a school in our own home."

Exactly two days before their first wedding anniversary, Suellen, their first baby was born — and tragedy entered their lives.

Armed with a huge sheath of gladioli, Jim went nervously into Beth's flower-decked hospital room to break the news to her that their baby had a bad disfigurement.

"Beth wept bitterly at first," Jim recalls. "But then she sat up, blew her nose, and started making plans to have the baby's lips corrected."

After five operations Suzie is a happy little girl, with only a faint scar on her upper lip.

"We don't know why this has happened to all our babies," Beth says. "The doctors can't explain it—there's nothing to account for it in our families' medical history. But whatever's wrong, it seems to lessen with every baby.

From the first, Jim and Beth refused to treat it as a tragedy. They concentrated on having Suzie mingle normally and without self-consciousness with all the children of the neighborhood. They sent her to the local kindergarten. And that's how they got into the square dancing whirl.

A barn dance began it

It was a new kindergarten, with financial problems. Bright young Beth and Jim soon found themselves on the parents' committee helping to raise money.

One November, four years ago, they had a barn dance at the local scout hall after an afternoon fete. To the dance came a set of amateur square dancers and an amateur caller from a small private club in a Melbourne suburb, the only one in Australia at that time.

At first, Jim and Beth and the locals just stood and looked on. But soon they found themselves in the sets, and enjoyed themselves so much that they immediately formed a private club themselves.

It's the joke of the Vickers-Willis family that Beth immediately won success at square dancing—but Jim failed.

The exhibition set was short of one girl, and the members asked Beth to join them permanently. "But do you mind if you come alone?" they asked anxiously. "That chap with you, in the yellow shirt, is terrible!"

That "chap in the yellow shirt" was soon to become one of the world's greatest square dance callers. But even his wife admits he's not a good dancer.

"Few callers ever are," she says. "Jim has no style at all — he's too happy and throws himself all over the place."

Jim became fascinated with square dance calling, spent hours reading books, researching in the public library, playing square dance records and practising on a dummy microphone at home.

"We'd have the neighbors in dancing until four o'clock in the morning, but only as a very great favor, when the records ran out, would they give Jim a go and dance to his calling," Beth says.

Jim's first public square dance was nearly a failure, too. It was a dance for the kindergarten, for which they sold five hundred tickets — the biggest

Their happy smiles, unshadowed by the suffering they have shared, Jim and Beth Vickers-Willis look confidently to the future as the Stratheden carries them and their children, Suellen, Peter and baby Tony, to a holiday in Queensland's winter sunshine.

square dance ever to be held in Melbourne or, indeed, in Australia, up to that time.

Jim called from a platform made of planks laid across fruit cases. "Every time I beat my foot the microphone toppled over," Jim laughs.

"The dance was a flop until halfway through the night, when Jim decided to call 'Alabama Jubilee.'" Beth says. "It had never been called in Melbourne before, and certainly not in Jim's way. He gave away the monotonous American chant and half-sang the call. It brought the house down. The rest of the dance went like a house on fire, and we ended up with a new club, with four hundred members, at Earl's Court."

In a few weeks, the numbers had swelled to two thousand. Within six months of that first kindergarten dance, the club had grown so big that Jim gave up his regular job as a reporter to give all his time to it.

Square dancing swept Melbourne like a permanent Melbourne Cup fever. Soon Jim was calling for five thousand dancers five or six nights a week. He formed his own exhibition set of dancers to show newcomers how it was done. He had his own radio programme — the theme song was "Alabama Jubilee," of course — and he travelled all over Victoria and across to Adelaide to spread the new craze.

"We knew he was overdoing it so much that he might make himself sick," Beth recalls with a shiver.

One night fifteen months ago, none too happily, she saw Jim off on a plane to Adelaide, where he was to call for a big dance the following night. He hadn't been feeling very well before he started out. But during the dance he had to chew sedatives to keep down the pain in his head and neck.

Two of the square dancers took him back to his hotel, then put him on the plane back to Melbourne. He had to have oxygen all the way home in the plane.

At home, Beth had received a terrifying telegram asking her to have a doctor standing by when he got home. The doctor promised to come as soon as his surgery hours were over. But Jim couldn't wait — he was in too much pain.

Fans helped them both

"Jump in the car and drive for the first doctor's red light you can see," he gasped to Beth. And Beth, frantically, jumped.

In her terror, she ended up with not one doctor, but three. One diagnosed a slipped disc, but the other two said "polio." At one a.m. Jim was on his way to hospital in an ambulance.

Beth hates to talk about the rest of that nightmare week, when Jim got worse and worse, until his lungs became affected. He was unconscious on the Thursday they put him into the respirator. Doctors quietly warned her that there wasn't much chance of his recovering.

"When he was conscious for brief moments, I sat by his bed reading the stacks of letters and telegrams from his fans, urging him to fight and saying they were praying for him," says Beth. "It was the sort of thing I'd only seen in films before — and mighty sceptical I was until it happened to us. I've always felt very badly about not being able to answer all those letters personally, because I firmly believe they pulled him round the corner."

But Beth had more on her mind that answering letters at that moment. Tony was due to be born any moment. The dreadful question haunting her was: "Will he be all right—or will he be disfigured, too."

One night, three weeks after Jim became ill, and only three hours after she had been sitting by his iron lung, Beth was rushed to a maternity hospital eight miles away.

The next day, she was wheeled to the telephone in the matron's office and Jim was wheeled in a pram to the telephone in his matron's office.

"It's a boy — and he's fine," Beth told him. "Then we both howled for half-an-hour," she recalls. "Actually, Tony did have two ridges of skin on his upper lip, where the hare-lip had begun to form. But a slight operation fixed that."

Getting Jim better needed something more than the surgeon's knife.

Two thousand of his fans held a benefit dance in Melbourne, one night, and made enough money to buy Jim a respirator of his own.

When he came home from hospital, after seven and a half months, he weighed only seven stone, and was completely helpless. He couldn't even feed or shave himself.

Beth became his only nurse and physiotherapist. Gradually, she helped him fight his way out of the respirator — first for two minutes at a time, then, in a record three weeks, for a complete day.

Learning to walk again was the next battle. Beth worked for hours exercising his muscles.

The first time Jim walked again in public was at a benefit dance which five thousand of his fans gave in Melbourne last November. He called the dances from a wheelchair. But at the end of the evening he staggered everyone — including Beth — by walking off the stage holding her hand.

She is still holding his hand — in the surf off Queensland's sunny Caloundra beach.

"I'm going to swim and soak up the sun until I'm so strong my wife will be terrified," Jim says with a twinkle.

"That's one way I'd positively enjoy being terrified," Beth laughingly retorts.

Plans for polio victims

Lying on the sand in the sun, Beth and Jim have been talking over great plans to help other polio sufferers.

"The one drawback to the great news about the Salk vaccine is that people have the impression that anyone who has ever had polio will be cured by it," Jim says. "They forget that the Salk vaccine is to prevent polio — that for thousands of people like me it has come too late. There are thousands of people who will still be doomed to live in an iron lung, or in a wheelchair."

Jim specially wants to help people in iron lungs, by buying new inventions which turn over the pages of books, or tune in radios, when the patient presses a switch with his chin.

"I've been in an iron lung myself—I know what it's like. You can't do a thing — not even if a blowfly divebombs your nose."

Jim and Beth estimate that their plan will take £30,000. It's a colossal task, but Jim expects to go home to Melbourne in September, completely cured, to start it.

And the "Mighty Atom" will be right beside him.