

The Hawkes Bay Earthquake, February 3rd, 1931.

I am Catherine Downes, née Crosse, and in 1931 I was living with my family on Patoka Station, my father's sheep station at Patoka, about 30 miles north west of Napier. I was seven years old, my sister and brother younger; my sister and I were enrolled with an English correspondence school, P.N.E.U., and when the earthquake struck we had just stopped lessons for a drink and a biscuit.

Our old wooden house had a long passage through the middle and I was at one end of it, looking for something when I felt a tremor and thought "This must be an earthquake", never having felt one before. Next moment the world exploded round me with a terrible roar, the ground heaved and buckled under my feet, and I know not whether I ran or crawled back to Mother in the kitchen. My next memory is that we were all on our feet in the kitchen, Mother, we children and our grown-up cousin Kitty from England, making our way slowly to the back door in a panicky bunch. Outside there was a concreted yard, and along one side of it, under a roof, there was a copper and a row of three heavy wooden wash tubs. On the far side of the yard stood a dairy and store room, and a door beside the copper led out to a drying green with fruit trees. As we went through the yard I believe I saw the tubs come away from the wall beside us while the concrete cracked beneath our feet. Certainly we saw those effects when we returned to the yard later on. Outside that yard door a couple of big round rain water tanks fell from their stands as the earth rocked under them. I suppose it rocked, as the tanks fell out and away from the wall while the tubs fell in the opposite direction inside. I remember it heaving and buckling in all directions at once as it were.

I suppose we stood out in the open with the fruit trees lashing about all round us, but I don't remember noticing that, though many years later I did observe trees in motion during a much smaller quake. Eventually peace descended with an astonishing silence, even more memorable than the roar of the quake. No birds sang, no animals cried, we walked out to the front gate and all around us thousands of tiny moths fluttered out of the undergrowth. That mental picture is still very clear, but what we found when we went back indoors is not, it merges into the following days and weeks.

For the first few hours we were alone at the house. My father and the shepherd were miles away at the back of the farm mustering sheep. Latest information suggests that they were close to the epicentre, near the Dome hill. Father said later that even the dogs couldn't stay on their feet and there was considerable disturbance of some land formations. He must have had an anxious ride home. He found us all safe, but the mess was appalling. The wooden house and buildings stood firm, but the wallpaper inside, hung on scrim of course, was split from ceiling to floor in most of the rooms, the chimneys were down and the walk-in



pantry was feet deep in broken glass and ruined preserves and foodstuffs, which were later shovelled out by the barrow load and buried somewhere deep and safe. The chimneys were another fearful mess. They had been two massive erections, one at each end of the house, of quite large limestone rocks, topped with ordinary brick chimneys, and these had been reduced to huge cairns with the brick tops, still intact, sitting awkwardly on or beside them. The more conventional chimney in the living room inside the house, <sup>fell</sup> largely through the roof of the adjacent verandah I think, I remember that damage but nothing of the mess inside.

There were of course constant aftershocks for months, of which the most important occurred on February 13th, apparently centred near Puketitiri, several miles west of Patoka, and we thought it even more severe than the first great shake, though it seems to have had less impact on the rest of Hawkes Bay. It did comparatively little damage, since everything that could fall down had already done so, but I well remember its action, which was quite different from the first. It really rocked. I suppose it was mid-morning again, since Mother and Kitty were in the kitchen and Susan and I playing in the passage outside. We hurried to join the others, but we couldn't climb the tilting floor, down which Mother was stumbling towards us. Then the floor swung back and we were tumbling down as she tried to climb up to us. That reversal occurred several times before we could get together and head for the back door and the outside world again. Presently the cowman gardener appeared from somewhere and asked nervously "Did you feel the shake?" He had been enjoying his annual leave in Hastings on the 3rd, and woke up in the street, still in bed, outside the hotel where he'd been staying.

On the 4th my parents decided to drive to Hastings if possible, to see how Father's parents had fared. We were able to get through, going via Napier, so we saw for ourselves the terrifying sights familiar from so many photographs, and safely reached St George's Rd. to find that the family had set off for Patoka, shaken but unharmed. Their nice two storied house, where the Horticulture research Station now stands, was so badly damaged that they had the top floor removed later, leaving a handsome staircase going nowhere in the front hall.

For weeks we slept in a tent on our front lawn, and were soon brave enough to play earthquakes, shaking the furniture and rolling on the ground, while Mother, an English actress before she married, learnt to cook in a camp oven in the orchard, with Father's help, and then in a funny little colonial oven outside until the rocks could be removed and the kitchen fireplace rebuilt in ordinary brick. We soon climbed the hill behind the house to see the huge cracks up there, that remained for many years. There's a great fault behind it, and traces of many earlier earthquakes. Interesting country.