

Memories of the Hawke's Bay 1931 Earthquake

The 1931 Earthquake was an experience I shall never forget, and even now any low rumbling noise fills me with apprehension.

I lived in Havelock North with my mother and father and sister in a brick two-storeyed Chapman-Taylor house. It was fortunate for us that Chapman-Taylor built his houses for posterity, rather than comfort, with double steel re-inforced brick walls and concrete floors. The earthquake caused little damage to the structure of the house, only breaking the two tall chimneys, which jumped and twisted on their bases, and causing one crack in an upstairs dividing wall.

All Mother's beautiful wedding presents brought with her from Canada were smashed, and I have never since been able to feel deeply for "possessions."

Our very large heavy bronze and marble clock just missed me that morning, falling and denting the floor where it landed. February 3rd. was a hot Hawke's Bay summer morning, like many summer mornings before and since, and we had no warning of the sudden earthquake.

I was with my mother in our Hall, and then somehow we were outside sitting on the garden path outside the front door. I have no recollection of running, but suppose we did. My sister was not with us and when it was possible to stand I went inside and found her in her bedroom trapped by the door which had jammed. Her memory is of watching Te Mata Peak sway up and down, as she stood helpless in front of her window. The door opened with a good push and we both ran outside.

That first day we waited - for the next tremor or shock, and we waited for news. My father was in the Herald-Tribune building in Hastings and we had no way of finding out what had happened to him, or to Hastings. So we waited, and to our great joy and relief, in the late afternoon he came home, driven by Bill Whitlock the Managing Editor of the Herald-Tribune. They had spent the day helping to organise a tent hospital at the Hastings Racecourse. The Havelock and Crosses Road bridges were both destroyed, but the road from Hastings through Pukahu to Havelock was passable.

My memories of the days that followed that initial 'quake are sometimes blurred and sometimes vivid. All communications were disrupted, and we used candles for weeks.

We were frightened to stay in our brick house, and were very fortunate to be able to live next door with a neighbour in her small wooden cottage.

For many uneasy nights we slept on mattresses on the floor of the front verandah. All those first nights we lay waiting for the next shock, and watched by the face of the cold, uncaring, Full Moon, which made sleeping even more difficult. (The Full Moon is always an Earthquake Moon now to me.)

I remember the comforting sound of the Night Patrol, as their running feet pounded round the house every night. We cooked on the back verandah on a Kerosine stove and I can still see the mouth-watering sight of our first stew of chops and tomatoes. Nothing since has tasted quite so tender and good.

In those days we had no car or radio so were very dependant for our

supplies on the usual deliveries of meat, groceries and vegetables. These wonderful services were soon resumed, so we were not short of food. A rainwater tank supplied our water which was a great blessing. One of our neighbours, who had a few months' old baby, camped in a tent in our garden. The baby, John Coulson, was beautiful and my sister and I adored him.

In the following weeks one of Havelock's most enterprising and energetic ladies, Mrs. (Emmy) Turner-Williams, conceived the idea of performing the Gilbert and Sullivan operas in the open air. Four lorries were backed together in the Presbyterian Church grounds. The cast rehearsed as best they could, and the costumes were gathered together from many cupboards and fancy dress collections around the Village. The music and songs were played by a gramophone and amplifier and the cast acted and mimed the words. It was all great fun. I was one of the ladies in "The Mikado" and my sister one of the "three little maids." One of the actors in "The Mikado" was to be my husband (John von Dadelszen), although I didn't know this until some years later.

One of my warmest memories of the Earthquake time is of the kindness and helpfulness of everyone everywhere. The 'quake seemed to have brought us all closer together as a community, and all the artificial barriers between people were dissolved.

Looking back now, I am glad that I was part of "Our Village" through those tragic days.

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