

Only An Orphan

First-hand Accounts of Life in Children's Institutions



by Peggy Crawford



St Hilda's Orphanage Otane (c1929)
(photo courtesy Ruth Hammond)

care for the baby and brought her up as her own daughter. These circumstances were unknown to Andy and for many years he was totally unaware of the existence of a younger sister. At the time of his mother's death his maternal grandmother apparently could not take Andy into her already very full household. Although only four years old, when he was taken to the orphanage, he clearly remembers the matron telling him that his grandmother had just gone away to get a blanket. He sat in the gutter sobbing uncontrollably for his mother while he waited for Grandma, but she never did come back. He describes the experience, *"That Home was in Brooklyn in Wellington and later, in 1912 we moved from there to a brand new building in Berhampore. There were about 50 children I think. Upstairs there were two dormitories, one for the boys and one for the girls separated by Mr and Mrs Mills' bedroom."* The Presbyterian church had been renting accommodation for their inmates but it soon became apparent that a more permanent arrangement had to be made because of the steadily increasing numbers of children being taken into care. Ten acres of land was purchased in Berhampore and in February 1912, Lord Islington, the then Governor-General, laid the foundation stone of the prospective new orphanage with all due ceremony. Nine months later Andy was present at the official opening of this tudor styled two-storied building. Actually there were 23 girls and 13 boys in the first intake that day. To accommodate the ever increasing roll, a further building for boys was erected nearby to keep up with the need. By 1918 another large house was built in Island Bay to care for babies and young children up to five years. All buildings were completely occupied by the end of 1919 and as was the case nationally, the numbers peaked to an all time high in the early 1920s.

RUTH

In March 1931, eight-year old Ruth's mother died of peritonitis. She left two daughters, Doris, who was two years old and Ruth. It was the height of the Depression in New Zealand and their father was out of work. For a short time their grandmother looked after the girls, but when their father was offered work in Hawkes Bay, following the dreadful earthquake in February of that year, he accepted and took the children with him. They were first cared for by a family in the area and then admitted to an orphanage a few miles away. Ruth's first impression was of a fire burning in the grate in the nursery and her father talking to the matron, but all too soon her father was gone. She says, *"I cried my eyes out."*

JOHN

Born in 1923 John was seven years old when he was admitted to a Catholic orphanage. *"My mother was widowed when I was four and she wasn't able to carry on looking after us and earn a living. The only work she could get was as*

wasn't going to, so he promised to come back for me if I stayed where I was. And sit there I did! Much later the matron tried to get me to come for tea but I still had my arm hooked around the chair and would not move. I told her very confidently that my dad was coming back for me and I wouldn't need to go in for tea. I finally fell asleep and was put to bed by the staff." It was many weeks before Bill's father did come back to see him.

JOY

Joy's mother was admitted to hospital for surgery and was found to have terminal cancer. Already separated from her husband, she had to hurriedly arrange placements for her three children. The two girls were sent to an aunt and uncle respectively and the brother was placed in a boys' home. Joy's mother was in hospital for several months but was sent home, although very weak and ill and for a short while the children were able to be back with her. Joy's maternal grandfather, who was a dour Scotsman refused to have his dying daughter's children in his household because he could not bring himself to forgive her the disgrace of a marital separation and eventual divorce, yet it had been through no fault of her own. Joy's father, the erstwhile husband, had deserted the family for another woman and Joy and her sister were admitted to a girls' home where very different rules were enforced to that of their late, loving mother. The first night of her stay in the girls' home where Joy was admitted is the clearest memory she has. *"I was taken to this long room that I had to share with nine other girls. Nobody told me it was called a dormitory till later. When I undressed and put my night clothes on, the woman in charge ordered me to remove my singlet. I had always slept with my singlet on and was very upset."* Surprisingly, the bedding was quite attractive with two sheets, two blankets and even a frilly bedspread. Although this contemporary institution of the 1950s had taken a modern approach to furnishings, there was no provision for heating in the winter.

WILLIAM

William remembers just after the disastrous Hawkes Bay earthquake in 1931. *"My mother was taken by ambulance to hospital and some time later my father told me he was going to take me to visit her. I became rather confused as Mum's bed was in a large tent. I found out later the Napier Hospital had been very badly damaged by the earthquake and patients were cared for in tents."* William's mother subsequently died and his father went back to sea on the ship the HMS Veronica where he was employed as a captain's valet. Sadly, contact was severed completely after this. William was sent by train from Napier to Wellington to stay with a grandmother for a short time and from there he was put into a welfare home and then placed in the first of many foster homes.

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others were caught out and either the matron did not believe me, or I didn't have chance to explain my absence, but I got a real drubbing for that. As far as we were concerned it was innocent fun though our superiors would not believe that, especially as some of the older boys were there too."

As a welfare child, there was no choice of schooling or employment during teenage years. Decisions were dictated by the State. Dot was sent to a girls' residential home for two years at this time. At the end of her tenure, the matron (who had taken a special interest in her) wanted Dot to board with her and learn dressmaking. The authorities would not allow this and she was sent to a minister's household as their domestic help instead. It was 1947 and the wages were only 10 shillings a week. *"The wife was rather sickly and they had three children. I had to do all the chores, dishes, shopping, cleaning and cooking as well as washing nappies on my hands and knees in the bath. I even had to cut the lawns and clean the church as well as attend the service every Sunday. I wasn't allowed to eat with the family and I only had half a day off a week. I really felt as though I had been better off in the Home, at least I had other girls for company. The only entertainment I had was to go to the pictures very occasionally if I had a 'suitable' person to go with. One Sunday I was invited to go on a picnic with two girls but there was all this work to do first and then I was told I had to prepare the bread and wine for communion as well. It didn't leave any time to go on a picnic. Something just snapped and I rebelled. The minister then forbade me to go. That was the last straw. That night I packed a suitcase, got out the window and biked to the next town several miles away where I knew a family who were always nice to me. They were sympathetic and put me on a train to another town where my mother was living. After I got there I told Mum what I had been putting up with. She then rang the welfare office and told them bluntly that I wasn't going back to the minister, that I would be staying with her and getting a job in a factory and would be living with her. The welfare people never did come after me from then on."*

The February 1931 Hawkes Bay earthquake had a profound effect on Monica. *"We were in the school playground and were very frightened at the rumbling and moving ground. All of us from the orphanage walked back from school in the middle of the road because the power lines were down. When we got back, we saw a mass of broken glass everywhere. The matron had just done a lot of bottling fruit and jam making because it was that time of the year. All the jars were smashed. Windows were broken and bricks were dislodged. Because of the damage, we kids from the orphanage were sent down to Dannevirke for six months while the buildings were repaired."*

Escapes, Escapades, Earthquakes, etc.

Mary also recalls the 1931 earthquake. *"I remember the earthquake very well. I was put in a room by myself. No way was I going to stay there. We girls slept in chairs, all huddled together. I screamed everytime the shakes came. It scared the living daylight out of me."* In the early 1930s a wonderful endowment came the way of the children in the form of a wireless set. *"Curiosity got the better of us ignorant kids. There we were wondering how all the people got inside that band box!"*

Bert recalls various occasions when earthquakes shook the buildings. *"I'll never forget one time when fragments of plaster fell from the ceiling. We boys decided we could jump down the stairs two at a time if necessary, though I don't know what good that would have done."* Another alarming natural disaster experienced was a tornado. *"The big ferocious tornado struck the Wairarapa and in particular, Masterton in the late 1920s. From our view we could see bungalows with only four walls left. Corrugated iron became airborne, flying around like paper and when the wind died, down came torrential rain. None of us in the Home were allowed outside of course, but later when it all abated we did venture outside. Our Home looked a sorry sight. Something in the vicinity of 200 roof tiles in the main building had to be replaced and all the others had to be checked. How more window panes weren't broken I'll never know. For kids like us that episode was most frightening."*



(Photo Courtesy Gladys Jones)