

Growing up 'down under' —Life in a small New Zealand town

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My parents married young and together with their personal savings, some help from my grandparents, and the inevitable mortgage, settled in one of the newer suburbs of Wanganui, known affectionately as the 'river city', since it was situated at the mouth of the Wanganui River. The population in the 1950's was approximately 38,000 and, I think, declining.

The suburb we lived in had the unusual "gothic" name of Castlecliff, within walking distance of the sea, and the neighbourhood consisted mainly of 'young families', i.e. families with pre-schoolers. We lived in this suburb for over 10 years. The house itself was a 3-bedroom bungalow set on a $\frac{1}{4}$ acre section. My sister and I each had our own room, between which was the master bedroom, my parent's room. All three rooms were linked to the rest of the house by a passageway. On one side of the passage was a separate toilet and bathroom (a shower was added later), and at the other end, the 'front' door, being the main entrance to the house. There was also a 'back' door which opened into a large kitchen area. The living room was divided from the kitchen by a grey curtain. All our meals, prepared by my mother, were eaten at a red formica table and chairs, Sunday lunch (after attending the local church service) the culinary highpoint of the week, usually roast lamb and baked vegetables, with

pavlova, peaches and cream for dessert.

In the living room was a very solid chimney and brick mantelpiece. During winter, my father would collect driftwood from the beach nearby, axe it into manageable pieces, and stack the wood to dry in the woodshed (which was later replaced by a garage). On cold winter days a fire would be lit and the living room the only place to be for blazing warmth. My father also did any maintenance on the house, for example, repainting, and the upkeep of a property which included stubborn lawns that had to be mowed with a handmower, and a vegetable garden. My mother looked after the flower gardens; gladioli, sweet pea, red and white carnations, and the fragrant scent of the daphne tree outside my bedroom window forming impressions that still persist today. At first my parents did not have a car, so the only means of transport was my mother's bicycle, with a seat front and back. Later our first car was a Ford Series E, which caused great excitement at the time.

A few streets away was the local 'shopping centre', in those days, consisting of a grocery store, a stationers, a post office, and the famous Castlecliff hotel. Most families had a notebook at the grocery store where the weekly debit was recorded. The stationer was also a mens hairdresser, with a Victorian-style 'red, white and blue' striped pole outside the shop, and the barber inside resembled an army drill sergeant who styled hair accordingly—the 'short back and sides' and 'crewcut' were the only styles offered. The Castlecliff hotel closed at 6pm and was frequented by local workers from the wharf, the tannery nearby, and the abattoir.

Castlecliff beach, being on the West Coast, was a wild, unruly beach with black iron sand and treacherous currents. Fortunately, there was a life-saving club and during summer a volunteer crew of tanned youth in

their red and gold bathing caps were on duty.

All my schooling was done in Wanganui until I later 'went away' to university in Wellington: first of all, kindergarten, which was for playing games and mixing paints; then primary school, and the compulsory $\frac{1}{2}$ pint of milk daily, where I met my first girlfriend and recall many 'adventures' at the local swimming pool; and finally secondary school.

The secondary school, set among willow trees, was a private school of 192 pupils run by the Marist Fathers for boys only. The bike ride to this school was long, about 4 miles, and often the return home a struggle against a strong prevailing wind from the sea. A big part of the school curriculum was devoted to sport, rugby in the winter and cricket in the summer. However, could anything be more enjoyable than a fine day, with a light breeze and two rival teams in their whites, ready for a day of cricket? The school uniform was grey shorts, shirt, socks with blue rings on them, black shoes, and a cap, hated by all, with a nob on top that was 'pulled off' during the initiation ceremony for first-year pupils. If a pupil wanted to go into the mainstreet of Wanganui on a Friday night, it was compulsory to wear formal dress (black longs, black shoes, and a blue blazer with the school emblem inscribed on the pocket (the school motto was "noverim me, noverim te", let me know myself, let me know thee), much to the mocking delight of public school pupils. Failure to do so was punishable by '6 of the best', from a two-foot long instrument of terror — a cane.

The school programme included a study of foreign languages, French and Latin, and even ballroom dancing lessons for second-year pupils, their partners having been shanghaied from a private girls school. I left this school after 5 years, and the following year our family moved from

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Wanganui to Auckland, in other words, from a small town to a big town.