Down the Railway - Memory Session

Ōtaki Library

5 October - 10.30-11.30am

**Kevin Gardener** grew up in a 1-bedroom house in Dunstan Street. The house had no bathroom and they washed in an outdoor laundry.

They had a clock on the outside of the house. **Eric King** recalls that the clock read:

*It’s Time to Seek the Lord.*

Kevin remembers hanging out with other kids in the street. They spent many of their summer days down at the river – swimming and catching frogs. There were also gardens nearby where they helped with labelling the tomato boxes.

Some of the families on Dunstan Street and nearby included: Rountrees, Wylies, Bertlesens and Barretts.

Kevin Gardner’s parents and his uncle owned the Dowsetts clothing shop / drapery on the Main Highway which they opened in 1955. Their shop building was originally built by a man named McDowell.

The original “Dowsetts” was established by a Mrs Dowsett who had two small shops – one on Main Street and one on the Highway. She sold the business to a Mr Baker – who did very well during the war years, especially with the American soldiers (marines).

Kevin mentioned the tobacco factory (W.D & H.O Wills) that operated form the old Railway Theatre – and how on pay day the factory workers would spend their money with local businesses.

Local businesses he mentioned included: a bakery owned by Mrs Adair and Heeney’s chemist.

**Noel McBeth** asked when “the fire” happened that destroyed five shops on the Main Highway. There was some discussion about the date but most thought it was probably the very early 1960s. It burnt down the row of shops around where the Yates Furniture shop was later built. Shops destroyed included Ben Bell’s Cycle shop and the premises of Buddle, Anderson and Angus (solicitors)

**General discussion** about shops in the Railway area.

Shops / owners mentioned included: Burgess’ bakery (?), McBeths Butchery, Wylies bookshop, Websters Fish & Chip shop, Jack Rountree’s grocery store, Newbolds. Also Joe Collis the blacksmith in Dunstan Street. And Harold Taylor who had premises on the cnr of Arthur St / Main Highway.

Also mentioned was the barbers and billiards saloon owned by Henry Johnson. **Maurice King** mentioned that his grandfather Joe Devonshire had owned the Billiards saloon during the WW1 period. It was situated near the Railway Theatre.

**Maurice King** was born at the Ōtaki Maternity Hospital in 1937. His family lived in the cottage at 7 Te Manuao Road (which is still standing). His older brother is Eric King.

Maurice worked at the Atlantic Service Station (cnr of SH1 and Mill Road) from 1957-1967. At that time it was owned by Dick Fyson. He remembers farmers coming to pick up drums filled with petrol. Other service station owners who operated in the same location included Henry Cotter and Terry Renner (father of Vaughn Renner).

**Eric King** stated that the garage had originally been owned & built by Eric Tooby

The service station on the opposite side of the road (where BP is now) was Europa. **Tony Rountree** explained that the licensed Europa petrol pump had originally been situated alongside the Ideal Dairy (later the Pop-In Dairy) on the corner of Arthur Street and the Main Highway. The Debreceny family owned the dairy.

**Eric King** was born at Moutere Hospital, at the intersection of Mill Road and the Main Highway, in 1924. He and others recalled that the two-storey hospital building housed a number of different enterprises over the years –including a dentist, Loan and Mercantile agency, Dalgety and Co – before being pulled down.

Eric King remembers taking photographs of “the ramp” (and over-bridge) being built and opened in 1937/1938. Initially used oil drums were used instead of proper railings.

The house at the bottom of “the ramp” – now Harveys Real Estate - was owned by a man named Utiku (Hapeta?). Eric remembers catching a 4-foot long eel which he gave to Utiku. Others remembered that later Utiku’s daughter Auta lived there with her husband Dickie Horne.

Eric King also talked about the Fox family who had a small shop on County Road. They sold home-made goods, like pickles, jams and toffee apples – as well as “Coca-Cola for 4p each.” He remembered the time Mr Fox blew up a large stump – it caused so much noise they thought “the Japs had arrived.”

**General discussion** about the Railway Station as a busy community hub.

People recalled a time when there were regular passenger and freight trains. There was a tea-rooms at the station where the “Wylie girls” worked.

Market gardeners sent their goods to market, coal was delivered from Huntly and oats arrived for the local stables. Jack Ballinger ran buses from the railway station that delivered holidaymakers to the beach. Thompson’s bus service later did the same run.

**General discussion** about the visiting circus.

The circus animals (like the elephants and lions) would be delivered by train to Ōtaki. The circus tents would be erected in the paddock at Anzac/Mill Rd corner or on land in Aotaki Street (aprox. where Tahuna Flats are now).

Eric King recalled delivering butter to Mrs Royal who owned a bakery / tearooms at the Railway. His mother made the butter from milk from their house cow.

**General discussion** about whether people commuted to work in Wellington.

General consensus was that a few people did live in Ōtaki and travel to work in Wellington – but not to same extent as today. Eric King said that in the 1940s he worked and stayed in Wellington during the week but would come home to Ōtaki in the weekends. He would catch the “Field Express” train, there and back.

During the war years servicemen, including US Marines, would catch the train to Ōtaki for dances and other

**Peter McBeth** remembered delivering mince to Mrs Royal for her mince pies. His family owned the butchery. He told how he would go into the bakery kitchen where Mrs Royal would have two big bowls – one filled with cream and the other with chocolate icing. She would slice an éclair and use the knife to fill it with cream, then lick the knife and use it to ice the éclair.

This anecdote had people recalling Mrs Royal’s habit of keeping a roll of money in her garters.

Peter McBeth also recalled the 6 o’clock swill at the Railway Hotel and people rushing there after work to take full advantage before closing time.

Another story involved Hec Wylie using the butchery safe to store his takings overnight – it was some time before they discovered the safe had no back.

Pete McBeth also mentioned that his family butchery supplied meat to the US marine Camp at Paekakariki.

**Don Watson** was born in 1940. His parents had a house on the Main Highway. His mother would harness him to the pepper tree to keep him safe in the yard.

Others remembered being told by their parents to “go count the cars out on the road”.

Don recalled the BNZ – which much later housed the Ōtaki Museum. This building is now the site of Professional Real Estate.

**Tony Rountree** grew up on Dunstan Street where his parents were market gardeners. He recalled how busy the Milk Factory on Rahui Road was in the 50s and 60s – with some farmers still bringing their milk in by horse and cart. His father owned a grocery store on the Main Highway – and farmers would shop there after dropping their milk off.

**Patsy Whenuaroa** remembered that her father and his friends would use the “shower hut” behind the Railway Hotel to wash up after their rugby games. The kids would then wait in the car until 6 o’clock closing.

**Noeleen Gimblett** said that her husband Ted Gimblett would, as a young man, drive with his friends in an old Ford truck to the Ōtaki railway crossing. They would then jump into the guards-van of a passing train, and travel up to Levin for pies. They’d return to Ōtaki by the same means.

**General discussion** about the Railway Theatre.

People recalled it being used for lots of different purposes, including Ōtaki School fancy-dress parties in the 1940s, Saturday movie matinees and the local dances of the 1960s. During WWII it was a popular venue for Saturday night dances which the Marines attended. Sharp’s Orchestra played at these events – Jeanette Carpenter’s father and uncle were part of the ensemble.

Please note this was a memory-sharing session – where people willingly shared their personal reminiscences and memories of old Ōtaki. However we have learnt that not everyone remembers the same thing the same way. Please do not think that the information provided here is definitive.