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The Aunt Daisy Story

(continued from page 12)

completed the normal four-year course for pupil-teachers in three years, and in the final examination, took first place in science in competition with the pupil-teachers of the entire colony. In a letter dated March 16, 1900, her old headmaster at Central School, H. Dempsey, wrote his congratulations: "The fact of taking the first prize in the Colony in Science is something to be proud of, and you deserve very great credit for having gained such a distinction."

OUT of school, Daisy enjoyed whatever New Plymouth had to offer. Her mother, used to Gilbert and Sullivan and Sims Reeves and the Gaiety Girls, considered it very little. Daisy, without the same standards of comparison, found it good and sufficient.

The serious side of life was catered for by the church foremost, but in part also by a debating club known as the Mutual Improvement Society. Everybody who was anybody belonged, but the debates were distinguished by a fearless quest for truth that took no count of social station. "I remember one subject which we thought was dreadful and treasonable," says Aunt Daisy. "It shocked me to the core! It was *Has Britain Reached the Zenith of Her Power?* Ohhh! I thought, what a dreadful thing to think of! Oh! I still feel like that!"

At New Plymouth, too, Daisy saw her first plays, *The Silver King* and *Hamlet*, performed by visiting players in the Alexandra Hall. And on Saturday afternoons, she learned to dance—the schottische, the polka and the barn dance, the mazurka, the quadrille, the lancers and the varsovienne. Later she rode to dances at the Freeling home-stead at Waitara, with her evening clothes in a parcel tied to the saddle—riding home again towards dawn when the dance broke up and the young men went off to milk.

But in the early days of her teacher training, the event of the week was still choir practice. "It was a big night," says Aunt Daisy. "All the other girls used to come out of choir practice and their boys would be waiting. Your mother would be somewhere in the offing, of course, but you walked with your own boy. That is, everybody except us! Katie and I were considered very fair and pretty, and we regularly got asked, but mother would stay with us. There's a song about that, I think. It's called 'Her Mother Came, Too!'"

To singing lessons, however, Daisy went alone. The teacher was a Mr Cornwall, an ex-railwayman so dedicated to music that he had put his family in financial straits in order to study abroad under an Italian master named Moretti. She learned to sing the Italian way—"Italians just stand up and sing"—without strain or mannerisms or contortions of the face. "We used to stand in front of a full-length mirror," she says. "You couldn't look at yourself in a mirror and be such a fool as to make faces!"

Cornwall taught her also to project her voice far into the ether—"Remember that deaf old gentleman at the back. He's got to understand. You've got to move him—make him laugh, or make him cry."

With memories, as with life, Aunt Daisy plumps for the brightest and best. New Plymouth town in the gay nineties floats back into memory with its streets



★ THE TAYLOR SISTERS — from left, ★
Daisy, Katie and Minnie

decorated for Christmas, the shops vying with one another in a profusion of old-world, yuletide red and green. The new land provided only the materials—red-hot-poker flowers for red, and puna fern for green. Maoris sat along the kerbs, peddling not holly or mistletoe, but tree and maidenhair fern.

Sometimes the quiet citizens were hammered into activity. Daisy would be startled awake in the night by the clangour of firebells rousing the volunteers. Then the town listened as the bell signalled Morse-like the direction of the blaze—north, south, east or west. Other alarms also came in the night, as the young men of Tukapa Football Club dispersed after their weekly practice. Milk-bar cowhands of their day, they spurred their thunderous horses through the silent streets with wild whoops and yells—galloping vigilantes in a region whose borders were rather herbaceous than Mexican.

TOWARDS the end of her pupil-teaching, Daisy saw other, more serious, squadrons of horsemen ride through the streets on their way to embark for the Boer War. Later she was to march with sad parades of her schoolchildren, wearing their father's medals and singing songs like "Soldiers of the Queen" and "The Boers Have Got My Daddy" . . .

I don't like to see my Mummy cry
I don't like to hear my Mummy sigh
I'm a-going in a big ship across the raging main,
I'm a-going to fight the Boers, I am,
And bring my Daddy home again.

Her teacher's training finished, Daisy was "planted down and given charge" of a country school at Warea, near Opunake, with 42 pupils ranging in classes from Primer I to Standard VI.

The Warea people gave her a great welcome, holding a community social in her honour. Everyone came to look

her over. "All the school committee men were there," she says, "and they looked me up and down and thought how small and girlish-looking and incapable I was." One by one, these hulking elders of the village concluded that such a pint-sized teacher must require manly help. They sidled up to her in turn and said: "Now if you have any trouble with those big boys, Miss Taylor, you just send for me. I'll come and lam them!"

In fact, some of the big boys who had rejected school in favour of work on the farm returned to the schoolroom for the specific purpose of having fun at the expense of the petite new female teacher.

There is an old law which says that when God created the world he made man the strongest; but He gave women equal chance; He made her tongue the longest. Those who came to scoff learned the force of this saying the hard way. They rapidly discovered the advantages latent in a good vocabulary, and remained to learn for themselves.

The welcome social itself was a far from sedate affair. "Talk about Rock 'n' Roll!" says Aunt Daisy. "It was nothing to a figure in the Lancers! The men were all hefty, country young men, and they liked getting me because I was so small. They just grabbed me round the waist and I went sailing through the air. Then they'd change to the other arm and the other direction. My feet never touched the ground at all!"

AT every opportunity Daisy continued to visit the Freelings at Waitara. For a time, as a pupil-teacher, she had held an appointment there. "Ethel Freeling and I were very fond of poetry," she says. "We used to lie on the same bed and recite poetry by the yard. And we

N.Z. LISTENER, AUGUST 16, 1957.