

The AUNT DAISY story

BRITAIN, in the final years of last century, had dispatched Kitchener to reconquer the Sudan, and after the Jameson raid, was preparing to fight the Boers for ascendancy in the south. New Zealand, under "King Dick" Seddon, had caught the imperialist fever and was trying to carve out an empire in the Pacific. New Plymouth went calmly about its business, absorbing into its education system, without discernible shock, a bright young pupil teacher named Daisy Taylor.

Radio broadcasting, later to become Aunt Daisy's chosen medium, was then little more than a wild surmise. Marconi had been granted the first patent for wireless telegraphy in 1896. By the time a trembling Daisy faced her first class at New Plymouth Central School, in 1897, the inventor was demonstrating to Italian Government officials at Spezia that his magic waves could reach out to warships at sea over the enormous distance of 12 miles. While Daisy perfected her inborn talent for speech, the ingenious Italian proceeded to perfect the medium through which she would be heard.

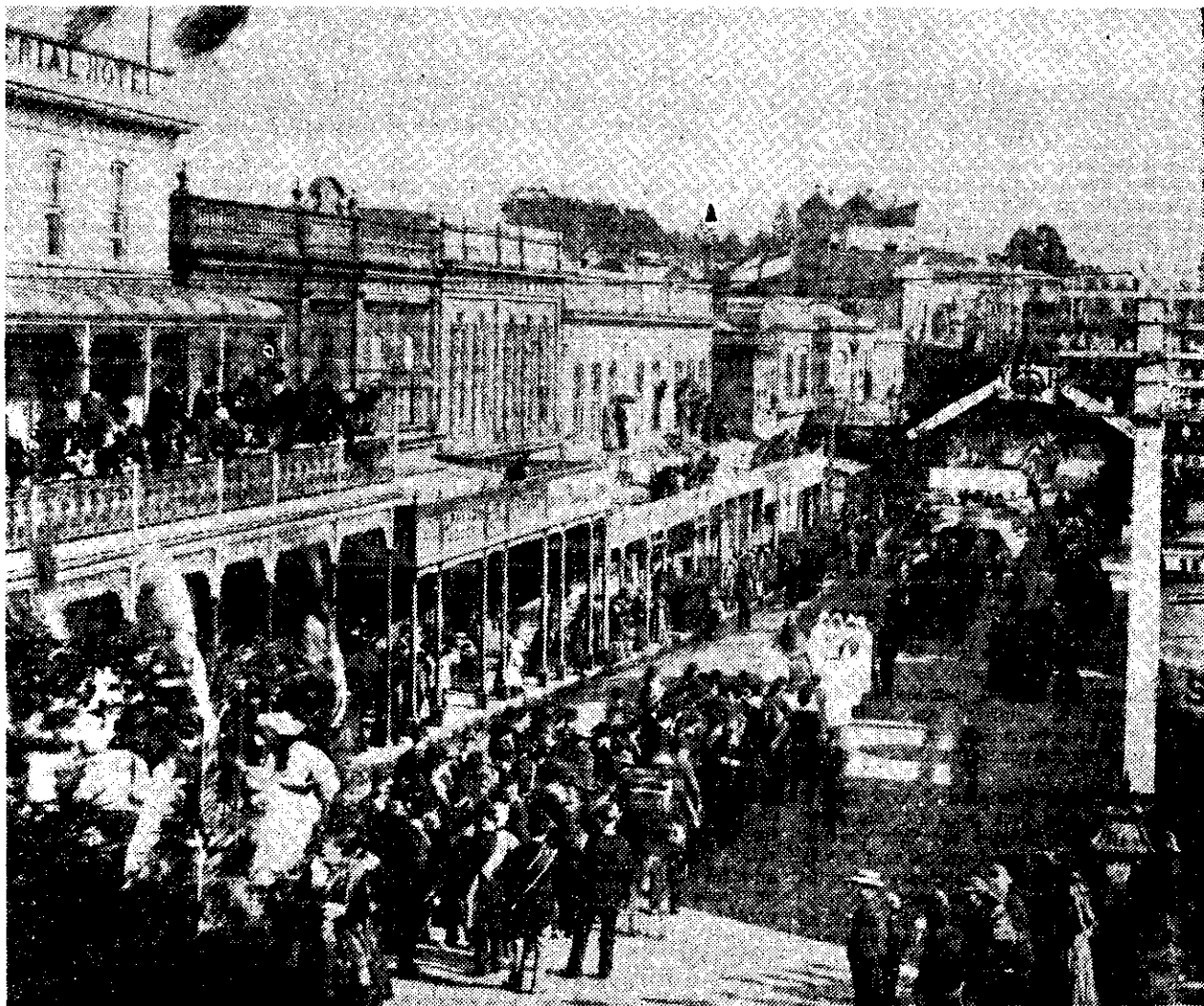
Daisy Taylor began teaching for the somewhat improbable reason that she needed the money. Fares for the voyage to New Zealand had depleted the family's funds, and after only two years at high school Daisy was obliged to work. She was quick and clever as a pupil and an opening could be found for her in teaching. The starting salary, a princely £20 a year, would at least ease the strain on the family budget. And for a girl who worked hard and passed her exams, there was hope of as much as £60 in her fourth year.

Already Daisy had a family connection with the teaching profession. Her eldest sister Isabel, usually known as Minnie, had taken up teaching in a small country school at Pukearuhe, boarding with a settler, Constable Seymour, and his wife. She was especially popular for her knowledge, common to all the Taylor family, of music. Daisy had visited her sister for holidays and liked what she saw of the life and the work.

"Teaching in the country," she says, "was a wonderful thing for a girl like Minnie, who'd been brought up in London, very prim and strict always. She'd never taught in her life, and knew nothing about teaching, but she was well educated and was soon accepted."

Daisy herself found Pukearuhe memorable for its White Cliffs; for horseback rides—perched side-saddle—through the tunnel to Mokau; and for the steep bush tracks along which recruits for the Hau Hau movement had passed in the last stages of the Maori Wars. Less than 30 years before, a war party of Ngati-Maniapoto had murdered a number of settlers there, climaxing their day of slaughter by firing seven shots into the body of the missionary, Rev. John Whiteley, as he knelt in prayer. Minnie's host, Seymour, was a gaitered member of the Armed Constabulary which later garrisoned the Pukearuhe redoubt.

The journey on horseback by tunnel and cattle-drive to Mokau arouses in



Turnbull Library photograph

(3) THE FAIRLY GAY NINETIES

Aunt Daisy other, more romantic recollections. "The big landowner and chief man around there," she says, "was Mokau Jones. *Nowadays* I would say his son was just an ordinary farm young man, but *then*, well, you know, I thought he was all right then."

Certainly the Jones youngster was no match for the quick-witted Daisy. As she talked and mimicked and entertained them all, he would sit awestruck, and finally, with his slow smile, declare: "Oh, Daisy, you're incorrigible."

AS a pupil teacher, Daisy kept her incorrigibility well in hand and toiled hard. She was only sixteen years old, but that did not prevent her from maintaining a scholastic rivalry with Dick Thomas, pupil-teacher at the nearby Stratford School, and winning hands down. "I had to beat him every year," she says, "and I did, of course."

Without benefit of a Teachers' College, Daisy Taylor learned the pedagogue's skills by doing the job. "We went to work every morning at eight o'clock," she says, "and for an hour the

headmaster or his deputy would give lessons in one or other of our subjects until it was time to take the class at nine."

For the first year Daisy taught mostly under supervision by another teacher, doing the menial jobs and marking dictation books. At the Central School, which she had attended as a pupil, she found the atmosphere congenial. But the third year brought change. The young trainee was appointed to New Plymouth's South Road School; headmistress, Miss Shaw. This lady and her sister, Mrs. Douglas, were pillars of New Plymouth society. "They were very, very Victorian," says Aunt Daisy. "They never lounged. I never saw one of them lean back. They *couldn't* lean back! Miss Shaw's favourite remark was that 'Young people of today have no deportment!'"

Later, Daisy grew to love this uncompromising Victorian gentlewoman, even riding to school with her in her two-horse cab. But the first impression was never to be forgotten. Daisy presented herself at the school and was looked up and down.

"Oh," said Miss Shaw, "are you Daisy Taylor?"

"Yes, if you please, Miss Shaw, I am."

"Well, I don't know what use you're going to be to me! The School Committee, they take away from me Miss Mynott, who could manage things, and they send—you! What can you do? I don't know what use you're going to be at all!"

Daisy quailed. She felt that her mere existence was an affront to all strict, upright, God-fearing, unbending Victorian women. She scuttled away to prepare her first lesson as ordered. It was an object lesson. The object: a brick. Daisy was careful not to drop it.

While Miss Shaw terrorised her classes with sudden questions like, "Now, Lucy Simpson, where's Mount Popocatepetl?" Daisy learned her calling, and studied hard for exams. She

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ILLUSTRATION shows Devon Street, New Plymouth, as citizens gathered for the Diamond Jubilee procession of 1897

N.Z. LISTENER, AUGUST 16, 1957.