

The AUNT DAISY story

(5) AUNT FOR TWENTY THOUSAND

RADIO came through the Great War with some well-earned battle honours, but around the house it remained a burping, caterwauling infant. Some teen-age boys in Dunedin had made New Zealand's first known Morse transmission as early as 1908. Not till 1921, however, did the Government issue its first permit for wireless transmission of the human voice. Dr Robert Jack, of Otago University, was licensed to conduct experiments.

About the same time, Aunt Daisy was introduced to the new medium by her husband and her second son Geoffrey. By then the family lived at Waipukurau, Fred Basham working as engineer for the neighbouring Patangata County. The house had a spare room which father and son claimed for their experiments with wireless reception. They tried circuit after circuit. When one seemed to work they would hold a musical evening. Friends and nurses from the near-by hospital were invited along to listen.

"We would all sit mute," says Aunt Daisy, "and then somebody would say, 'Hark, hark! We've got it!' Then we'd hear an American voice saying something about the Hotel San Francisco. Oh, it was wonderful. We'd hear faint music—dance music. Then the set would give a howl and break down."

The sounds which rent the quiet night air of Waipukurau were mostly older than Signor Marconi's wonderful device. Aunt Daisy recalls being wakened by the "terrible noise" as mobs of sheep pattered over the echoing wooden bridge spanning the near-by Tuki Tuki. She herself went rural, keeping chickens and guinea fowls, and three Muscovy ducks to keep the ditches clean.

A house cow provided the milk and cream, the chore of milking falling usually to the eldest boy Freddy. Daisy's own experience with milking had not been fortunate, and the maid Elsie at first refused to help either. She was persuaded at last by a neighbour, Mr York, who, like most countrymen, knew how to handle females on four legs or two.

"You know, Elsie," he confided to the girl, "you'll never get a husband in Hawke's Bay if you can't milk a cow." Elsie learned.

The animals, by and large, were spoiled. Fred Basham struggled to prevent his family making his hunting dog Lyra decadent and fat. "Dad used to say that I took the fowls morning tea," says Aunt Daisy. "I sometimes *did* take them up a few biscuits."

In a large orchard at the back of the house, disabled soldiers from the near-by sanatorium were invited to help themselves to the fruit, and the children cooked green plums in billy-cans. They came near to explosion once as they stood round the fire cleaning plum juice from their clothes and hair with kerosene.

SLOWLY, by trial and much error, Daisy improved her cooking. The day when she advised others was still distant. "We had any amount of eggs and I used to make a sponge cake or two every morning," she says. "I think that's why the children liked to bring their school friends to the house. And, of course, with all those plums I used to make jam. I *generally* burnt it! And once you burn an enamel preserving pan it stays burnt forever."

Sewing remained something of a mystery. Daisy cut her husband's shirts from new material, using the old shirts for patterns. "Of course, the old shirts had lost their shape," she says, "and the collars I bought never fitted. So I just used to put in a few pleats. Poor Dad! When he wore my shirts he'd try to cover as much as he could with his

coat. I remember his saying, 'There's one thing I must ask you, Mother. Please don't try to make my trousers!'"

Pleats became an Aunt Daisy specialty. For Barbara she made Magyar dresses. They were cut from one piece of cloth. "Of course they never fitted," she says, "so I used to put a false pleat inside with a tape to draw it up. That made them fit!"

"I can remember being very hurt once when I stayed with my sister Katie in Wellington. We were brought up to be very polite to each other. So when Katie looked at Barbara's dress she said very gently, 'Daisy, are those pockets meant to be crooked?'"

Her chief interests remained music and church. She travelled a good deal to sing in concerts, and became choir-mistress at the Waipukurau church. Her eldest boy Freddy took turns with the vicar's boy to ring the bell. A. W. Stace, the vicar, was always on time for services, but the boys would continue ringing. They held up the service thus until Mrs Stace arrived.

"The Rev. Stace now lives in Levin," says Aunt Daisy. "So many retired clergymen live in Levin that they call it the Holy City!"

Daisy's love for music was passed on to her children. Freddy, the eldest, was performing Beethoven piano works at the age of six. The next boy, Geoffrey, took lessons in Waipukurau from a Miss Locke. Aunt Daisy recalls that he presented himself one day for his lesson wearing an expression of shining and unusual virtue. "I couldn't go to school today, Miss Locke," he explained. "I'm really ill. I've come for my lesson out of sheer goodness!"

THE first of Daisy's many thousands of broadcasts was a result of her musical talent. During a visit to Wellington for a concert engagement, she was

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THE STAFF of 2YA in the early thirties: Back row, L. Workman, K. G. Collins, R. F. Neate; middle row, R. Frisken, G. Short, R. G. Tulloch, D. O. Evans, S. W. McDonald, J. Macfarlane; seated, D. A. Tighe, Clive Drummond, J. Ball (director), O. M. Pritchard and Aunt Daisy; in front, C. Brown

