

In Memory: Hazel Mary Pettit: Funeral Tribute

Childhood

Hazel Mary Pettit was born in Westport on 17 August 1918. She was the elder daughter of Earnest and Ruby Pettit, who were farmers in Arapito, the southern Valley of the Karamea River on the West Coast.

Her mother was born a Scarlett, one of four children, Ella Verbena (who was my grandmother), Ivy, Ruby, Albert (who married Clara and whose daughter Bessie married into the Clist) and Alec who moved to Auckland. Arapito was a very closed community. Mrs Pettit, Ernest's mother, taught Ruby at the Arapito School. Basically Arapito consisted of two families, Scarletts and Linehams and a few others who had come to New Zealand on the Adamant in 1874 in a Vogel Special Settlement. Arapito and most of the families were exclusive Brethren as a result of the visit of an evangelist in the 1890s.

Uncle Ernest was a dairy farmer. Dairying had begun to flourish in New Zealand with the introduction of refrigeration and then the export of all the butter to Britain during the First World War. But sadly the Pettit family saw little of this prosperity, because father – Uncle Ernest, died of Peritonitis in that isolated community where medical services were so poor, when Hazel was only five years old and her little sister Phyllis only nine months old.

Move North

We can imagine how desolated mother was at this time in 1923. She decided there was no place for her in the settlement, and moved initially to Wellington where she lived with Earnest's sister who worked in the civil service. Ruby did the housework.

But then in 1924 they moved to Masterton, where her sister Ivy had married Mr Batty. The family lived at 86 Worksop Road in Landsdowne. Their house was a large one with steep roof and verandahs and a large garden. Mother would mow the lawn with a handmower and Phyllis and Hazel would stand behind and push their mother to help her. Mother worked very hard to earn a living. They took in boarders Mother did sewing for "old P Wright" who toured around the countryside selling clothes etc. Grandma Scarlett came to live with them.

Mother wanted the girls to have an education which she had not had. Hazel went to Landsdown School and like Phyllis was soon recognised as very bright and was allowed to skip a year. Then she went on to Wairarapa College, and reached the sixth form in 1933.

Wellington and University

So about 1934 Hazel won a junior national scholarship and went to Wellington Teachers College and also enrolled for her BA at Victoria University College of the old University of New Zealand, at a very young age for that time. Her mother and Phyllis also moved to Wellington at this time, living at 12 Raroa Road in Kelburn. Hazel proved to be a fine student. She completed her BA Degree in 1939 with a major in English, one of 29 graduates in Arts. In her examinations, which in those days were marked in England, she was awarded the highest marks in New Zealand in English in the whole of the four colleges of the University of New Zealand. She was awarded a Post Graduate Scholarship, and was invited to enrol for her MA and to tutor first year English students while she completed her MA Hons.

Teaching

Teaching meant they had to move around for promotion and additional experience. In those days graduates of the Teachers College were required to serve their first year in a primary school, and Hazel served that year at Kelburn School. It was the first full year of World War II and with many men teachers enlisted for the forces, Hazel was then appointed to Horowhenua College in Levin probably until 1947. Meanwhile Phyllis was studying, and when Phyllis completed her degree, both Hazel and Phyllis taught at New Plymouth Girls High School, thus completing their two years of country service.

Hazel, like her sister, were devoted to their pupils and their teaching. Jan Driver, a pupil at New Plymouth Girls High School from 1948 to 1950 recalls how these attractive women came to teach us. Hazel was Jan's Form Mistress in 4th form – English, and Phyllis taught her History. She remembers Hazel as sweet, unselfish, someone who always thought the best of people. Students adored them. So knowledgeable in all things – geology, art, poetry. Heather Robertson in the book *The Springboard for Women* by Christine Colcatly comments that "The two Misses Pettit I admired greatly. To me they spelt the first step in womens lib They wore

the latest "gear". Apart from that they both taught English in an interesting and colourful way."

But they were not liked by teachers to the same extent. During their lunch break, Hazel and Phyllis would change into their swimsuit in the toilets adjacent to the common room, cycle to the beach. They were spotted by a senior mistress who said it set a bad example to the girls who might see them swimming. In those days, a lot of the children went home for lunch. (I think they still continued to do swim.)

Others recall that they did adventurous things – skiing; Hazel had an accident – Phyllis thought she had disappeared into the mountain; fortunately Hazel had only broken her nose – it looked a real mess and the students were upset. They biked around the North Island in their holidays – did fruit picking – camped beside the rough and dusty metalled roads.

Hazel then moved to Kaitaia High School and had remarkable experiences with Maori and other students in that isolated area.

Her final appointment was at Rangitoto College where she was appointed the Senior Mistress when that school was founded in 1958. She remained until 1971 when she took early retirement to care for her beloved mother, who had always lived with her in all these varied places.

Mother and Daughters

Anyone who knew the family over those years would recognise the deep bond between Ruby – 'mother' and Hazel and Phyllis. Both daughters viewed their mother as "a marvellous woman" and she thought the world of them. Mother had brought them up to be independent and yet they cared freely for each other. Both Hazel and Phyllis have a portrait photograph hanging in their rooms. Hazel took early retirement in order for her to look after her mother and later Phyllis returned to Auckland from Kaikohe to also help care for her. They nursed the mother at their home at 319 East Coast Bays Road in Mairangi Bay.

Family was important. They made visits back to Karamea on several occasions, There are photographs in an old album I have of their visit in 1926 and in 1931 and my brother reminded me of a family movie of their visit to Karamea in the early 1960s.

They developed a close link with my father, Alf Lineham and Uncle Cyril. Hazel and Phyllis wrote regularly to them in the war, and Dad wrote back faithfully.

My father kept those letters and maintained a faithful correspondence all those years.

Friends

People sometimes feel sorry for single people, because they have no children to care for them. Well, Hazel had no children but she had a large circle of friends. They knew what friendship was and were always marvellous friends to so many people. Their house was always filled with people. John McCaul, who sends his regrets to the funeral, recalls how in 1960 the Pettits took responsibility for him when he came to school in Auckland, and he would catch the bus from Onehunga to Kitchener Road, thus beginning a very long friendship. I'm sure there are many such stories.

Latter life

After mother died Hazel did her travelling with Phyllis – took a tour to China, Japan, visited Tahiti, Australia. There are wonderful photographs of their visit to China.

Then in 1999 she was afflicted with her illness and spent some time in Orongo – just up the road from the church. It was a difficult time for Phyllis. She visited her every day. Used to take her home for day visits as much as possible as well. Later she moved to Rosedale where she was the first resident in the hospital area. She was much loved at Rosedale. Rosedale staff told me that she was like their mother to them. She always remembered when staff were leaving the Village, and they would ask Hazel to say a few words at the farewell in the dining room. She would stand up and say lovely things about people. These words were very touching, yet she had no notes, but spoke from her heart and it all made sense. She was always very very grateful for what was done for her – “You are kind to me.” All the residents thought a lot of her. Participated in activities and loved the bus trips – sat in the front seat behind the bus driver. Played bingo. Rested in afternoon.

Personal Factors

Of the two sisters, Hazel was the quiet one. She was studious, very happy, warm smile, very talented, gracious, always interested in the other person; very witty; she always looked on the positive side. She was well read, she was creative. She worked meticulously painting china plates; went walking, she loved animals, especially their dog. She took great pride in her rose garden.

She was a cultured woman. She went to concerts, art galleries.

She had a deep faith. She had been Anglican; for a while she was deeply involved at Mairangi Bay Baptist Church, and latterly at this church. (Hazel was baptised at Mairangi Bay Baptist Church and became very involved there under the Rev [Cecil] Biggis.)

So we say farewell to dear Hazel, who so much enriched the lives of so many people. And yet we know this is not the end. We know that her own Christian faith was strong in the faith that we are never alone, and this life is not the end: And so we can see Hazel, with a twinkle in her eye, even now entertaining the angels!