



Mt VICTORIA

Historical Society News

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Sunday, July 21 at 2.30 pm
Crossways, 6 Roxburgh Street

New Zealand's Gardening History

An illustrated talk by Bee Dawson

Author of 'A History of Gardening in New Zealand'

Website

If you tried to use our website last month but couldn't find it, we can confirm now that it was unfortunately out of action. Mt Victoria Historical Society was caught up in the problems experienced by Wellington Community Net Trust, when the servers which host ours and a number of other voluntary organisations' websites were turned off. (You may have read about this in an obscure corner of your newspaper.) We are monitoring discussions that the Trust is holding with the host, and will review the future hosting of our website in the next few months.

Tour of Alexander Turnbull Library

In May, a number of members enjoyed a very interesting tour of the Alexander Turnbull Library. We were provided with an introduction to the wonderful resources there for New Zealand and Wellington research. Two key messages we took away were that there is no need to feel intimidated at the thought of going into such an august institution, because the staff are so approachable and keen to help, and that there are many more resources available than can be found on line. The staff had kindly brought out some precious items particularly relating to Mt Victoria. It was fascinating to see how tiny the Samuel Brees painting of the windmill in Mt Victoria really is (you can see a reproduction of it online or in our heritage panel on Majoribanks St) – and to see some of MVHS's own members captured in a photograph nearly 20 years ago!

Memoirs of a Mt Victoria resident

One of the great things about our website (when it is up!) is that we occasionally get contacted by people who want to share stories of their life here. One such, in April, was John Westbrooke who now lives in the UK. He lived at 21 Paterson Street from the time he was born in 1950 until he was 12; his family rented the upper floor while two hairdressers, Miss Nairn and Miss Webb, lived downstairs. The house has since been removed by NZTA but this is how it looked at the time. And here is a small extract from John's recollections:

"The occasional new block of flats went up in the late 50s but the Mt Victoria I grew up in was almost all two-storey wooden villas like ours - very much as in Marianne Muggeridge's picture, which you have on your website. The 50s have a bad reputation for dullness and conformity, but I don't recall this at all. We didn't have expensive clothes or toys - Dinky Toys and Meccano were about as fancy as it got - but nobody else did either, so we didn't feel hard done by. At primary school we learnt to knit and sew - even the boys - and our teachers were forthright about, say, the wickedness of apartheid . . . Clyde Quay when I was there was very racially mixed: lots of postwar migrants from East and West Europe, English, Dutch, French, Hungarian, Yugoslav, Greek and even Egyptian kids were in my class, along with Indians, long-established Chinese and islanders from the Cooks and Samoa, and a few Maori. My favourite book was *Our Street* by Brian Sutton-Smith (he wrote a couple of sequels), which I gather was highly

controversial when it was published in the School Journal (which had excellent writing and illustration). My copy of the book has so many apologies and explanations for its existence that it doesn't start until page 23. It was set in Island Bay in the 30s, I believe, but is still a realistic picture of my own childhood on Mt Victoria in the 50s."



Pirie Street Tram Crash 1920

By David McCrone



Tram accident on the corner of Pirie and Brougham Streets, Mount Victoria, showing crowds surrounding the scene and a police van at left. Photograph taken January 1920 by an unknown photographer.

National Library of New Zealand PAColl-D-0927-2

In the late afternoon of Saturday 3 January 1920, a city-bound tramcar carrying about 24 passengers crashed on the corner of Pirie and Brougham Streets, killing the motorman, Joseph Small, 54, “regarded as one of the most reliable men in the service of the Municipal Tramways”, and two male passengers, James Evans, a returned soldier, and James McEwan, a carpenter. About 10 people on board, including the conductor, Frederick Quayle, were injured, but not seriously.

The twenty-ton tram, Car 105, described as a “later-type air-brake car”, had a saloon at each end, an open compartment in the centre, and a central aisle from front to rear. On board were people returning home from a seaside carnival at Lyall Bay, including Norah, the wife of James Evans, and their thirteen year-old daughter Phyllis. The tram stopped briefly at the exit of the Hataitai tunnel and two young ladies were seen to adjust their hats using the mirror. Motorman Small sounded the gong before suddenly collapsing as the tram moved off. He was seen by witnesses to be “leaning forward in a droopy manner over his switches”, and then lying “perfectly still” face-down on the platform, where his cap fell off onto the road.

With no one in control and gathering speed as it descended Pirie Street, the tram continued unchecked past towards the compulsory stop at Austin Street, where a Miss Osborne of Christchurch waved and called out a warning (“The motorman is down”). Norah Evans rang the emergency bell and tried frantically to attract the attention of the conductor, Frederick Quayle, who was standing at the back of the tram with his arms folded. Her husband rushed to the front of the car to assist the motorman, trying to lift him up and apply the brakes. The conductor applied the handbrake at the back of the tram, with little or no effect, and a twelve year-old girl, Edna Haig, was seen to leap from the runaway car.

“Rocking and swaying in a terrifying manner”, the tram left the rails at the Brougham Street intersection, ploughing across the footpath, overturning onto its left side, smashing through a fence into the residential property of a Miss Collins, and plunging through the wall of the wooden car shed. “The impetus was so great that when the car did overturn the front bogey dug itself into the asphalt of the footpath, whilst the back part of it stood straight up in the air”. The front end of the tram was badly wrecked, the wheels twisted, the windows smashed, a bogey adrift, and the trolley-pole “pulled clean out” when it collided with a telegraph pole.

A scene of “undescribable confusion” followed. “The crash of the impact, the shrieks of the imprisoned passengers, and cries of the injured could be heard for a considerable distance around”. A large crowd gathered almost immediately, appearing to “spring from the ground”, and crammed the scene of the accident. Small was found “hanging over the switches with his neck broken”; the body of James McEwan was found under the rear of the car in a “frightfully mangled” condition; and James Evans, who “had a foot cut off” in the accident, died on the way to hospital in an ambulance. *The Dominion* said of Evans that “His courageous act and presence of mind undoubtedly cost him his life, for had he remained in the body of the car he would have probably escaped with slight injuries”.

Speaking to a *Dominion* reporter soon after the crash, Conductor Quayle had a somewhat different version of events: “The car pulled up as usual at the second stop after leaving the tunnel. The car then went on but I never noticed anything out of the common as we went down the hill until I saw the motorman’s cap blow off. Seeing that, I rang the emergency bell, but as no notice was taken, I rang it again. There was no response. All the time the car was gathering way, and I lost no time in applying the handbrake ... but the car was going at such a pace that the brake had little effect. ... I held on to the handbrake to the last”.

At the inquest, the motorman who handed the tram over to Small said it was in first-class order, and there were no problems with the brakes. The coroner found that the accident was caused by the physical collapse of the motorman “practically at the moment when the car began to move down one of the steepest grades in the Wellington tramway system”. The post-mortem examination of Small’s body showed that his heart was normal but his stomach was empty, and it was concluded that he had fainted from lack of food. The coroner recommended that a device known as the ‘Dead Man’s Handle’ be installed in trams, to bring them to a stop in the event of the collapse of a motorman.

A witness at the inquest commented that the injuries sustained by passengers were in most cases “quite trivial”. Marks on the road showed that the tram had commenced its turn into Brougham Street before crashing. Had it not done so, and had it continued down the steep gradient of lower Pirie Street towards Kent Terrace, the injuries and loss of life would certainly have been far worse.