

Holiday Memories

Piha in the 50s to mid 60s

A police roadblock on the Piha Road interrupted our journey. George Wilder was on the run again, and rumour had it he was in the Waitakare Ranges. I imagined us all piling out of the car whilst it was searched; but instead the police gave a cursory glance inside our vehicle and waved us on. When I pointed out their oversight, Dad commented that one look was sufficient to see there was no room to hide anyone in a car full of children, beach toys and provisions to last a fortnight. We were off to Piha for our annual holiday. Kitchen equipment and blankets were among the few things kept at our rustic bach, everything else we brought with us each summer. On arrival we'd traipse up the hill carrying heavy leather suitcases and boxes of food then back down again for more gear, until the car was emptied.

The bach was built of handmade concrete blocks, which Dad believed had been constructed on the metal road and dragged up the slope to the site. The blocks sat on a concrete pad, which lay directly on the sand. Over the years the building had shifted, creating cracks in the walls; which gave us added glimpses of the surf and an entry for the kikuyu grass to creep inside. The door to the bach opened into a small kitchen containing a sink bench, cupboards and a safe. In the next room was a coal range and dining table. Beyond the dining room was a generous lounge, with a seldom-used fireplace in one corner. A short passageway from the lounge led to two bunkrooms. At one end of the passageway a door opened outside on to a north-facing porch enclosed on three sides. The piece de resistance, as far as we children were concerned, was a large freestanding gramophone with two doors in front which we opened when playing a record. Each holiday before anything was unpacked we'd rush into the lounge, lift up the gramophone lid, place a 78 on the turntable, wind the handle on the side of the cabinet until the tension felt right, then gently lower the heavy needle arm on to the record. As the gramophone unwound the turntable slowed, causing the sound to drag, so we'd quickly crank the handle back up to speed. The song "*I Don't Want to*

Set the World on Fire” runs through in my mind whenever I recall these times. I’m sorry to say later when the gramophone no longer worked, its wooden cabinet became a kennel for my brother David’s dog for a while, and we children used the 78s as flying saucers, hurling them into the hollow at the end of our section where they remain buried, along with the gramophone, demolished bach and coal range. In the mid 60s when our new bach was being built, I pleaded with Dad to keep the coal range as a barbeque; but without success.

On holiday we were treated to Dad’s cooked breakfasts; bacon, eggs and fried tomatoes on toast. Each summer Dad purchased a case of tomatoes from our neighbour Johnny Byers, the Ranger at the time, who grew them in glasshouses opposite us in Valley Road (later re-named Beach Valley Road). To get to Byers’ place we crossed a swing bridge, which hung above one of the glasshouses situated below the level of the road. As we got older we were allowed to cook our own toast in the coal range. We learnt how to push the three-pronged fork into the bread, ease it through the little door and hold it high enough above the glowing embers so that it cooked without burning. Removing the toast took a bit of care; the trick was to line it up with the slot in the coal range so as not to knock it off the fork and loose it to the fire. The coal range served us well; heating our water and cooking our meals. It came into its own whenever there was a power outage; friends, whose bach had electricity, would arrive at our door for a cup of tea. Amongst our holiday provisions was always a cooked ham on the bone. It was a great standby in a place without electric power. Dad created a “fridge” underneath the tank stand by digging a deep hole in the sand, into which he placed a large pipe on end and sat a wooden lid on top. The milk and butter kept surprisingly cool inside our fridge, and once we were intrigued to discover a small frog in the bottom of it.

After dinner my elder brother, Dean, and I would walk to the “little” store in Valley Road carrying a large ceramic milk jug which, for two shillings, Mrs Ketterer would fill with scoops of vanilla ice cream. We shopped mostly at this nearby store for fresh supplies which arrived regularly by bus, but for

telegrams and mail (including the all important School Certificate exam results) we'd cross the lagoon on the makeshift bridge opposite Mrs Ketterer's store and cut through the camping ground to the "big" store; which in those days had a petrol pump outside it.

At night Dad lit the Tilley lamps – pump, pump, pump, then whoosh and the lamp burst into life. One evening, to our horror, a lamp caught fire as Dad was priming it. He managed to carry it outside and extinguish the blaze by shovelling sand over the flames. Lighting in the bunkrooms was a tiny twinkle high up on the ceiling which took the edge off the blackness of the night; a couple of torch bulbs powered by two large batteries.

Water was always a consideration at the bach. We learnt at any early age to use our supply sparingly; half a cup each time we cleaned our teeth, a bucket outside the door to wash the black sand off our feet, and regular swimming in the lagoon as a substitute for a bath. If Dad decided the car needed washing we'd head to the stream at the end of Glen Esk Road armed with bucket, rags and chamois leather. One particularly dry summer when we'd almost run out of water, Mum and Dad prepared us for the likelihood of having to cut short our holiday. How envious we felt as we watched the water truck bringing tank loads to water to baches with vehicle access. We'd resigned ourselves to returning to town when nature came unexpectedly to our rescue, in the form of a deluge the night before we were due to go home. Our two corrugated iron tanks were filled to the brim and people who'd purchased water the day before had more than their tanks could hold. To our delight we were able to continue our holiday.

We ran barefoot most of the summer, not bothering to wear sandals to walk on the metal road, although we did cover our feet to get across the hot iron sand on the beach. Our daily activities were based around the incoming tide, which was when we swam in the surf; always between the flags. Most days we swam in the lagoon too. There were several pockets of sand along the edge of the lagoon, free of encroaching lupins and kikuyu grass, where Mum would sit for hours watching us show-off in the water. Each year Dad would

don his old khaki shorts, and with scythe in hand hack back the lupins to re-establish the “Burma” track; our short cut down the bank to the lagoon. We kept our heavy dinghy tied up in the lagoon for the duration of the holidays. It was one thing pushing it down to the water at the start of each summer, but not so easy for Dad to drag it back up the hill again when it was time to go home.

The property behind us was owned by a bachelor, Bob Bannatyne, who'd planted a stand of pine trees on his land to hold the sand in place. I remember seeing him only a couple of times, when he and Dad were discussing proposed vehicle access to our respective properties. He seldom visited his investment and eventually sub-divided his land and sold the sections, but prior to that the “forest” was a great playground for us. The pine needles were so thick on the ground we used them like sand, to built edges around our huts. We found lots of ways to entertain ourselves. We collected fallen pine cones and twigs for the coal range, and played a variety of hiding, seeking and chasing games; one which we named “kick the bucket”. Once for a bit of amusement I roped my sister, Jan, into playing a trick on our younger brother. Mark loved history so I thought it would be a great idea for him to find some treasure; in the form of halfpennies, pennies and the odd threepence inside a rusty Edmonds Baking Powder tin, which we buried in the sand near the bach. To make the discovery authentic we created a map, suitably singed around the edges with a match. Mark was delighted with his discovery, although a bit suspicious. When the truth came out I felt rather bad about his disappointment, but consoled myself with the fact that he'd gained some spending money. Another summer my siblings and I decided to paint the outside toilet with some leftover paints Dad had knocking around. By the time we'd finished, the once reasonably discrete corrugated iron “house” had become a rainbow focal point, so garish that I had misgivings about our redecorating.

There was always a walk to take; around the rocks or up over the Tasman Lookout to The Gap, where we'd swim in the Blue Pool, view the Wedding Cake, or wander up to the Blow Hole, or further still to the ‘tennis courts’ to

watch the bracing power of the sea. In those days owners didn't seem so precious about their piece of turf and people moved about freely, enjoying nature's gifts. In the evenings we'd sometimes walk along the beach, scratching pictures in the wet sand for the incoming tide to erase. I always thought North Piha beach had an emptiness about it. We never swam there but I loved visiting the caves at the far end, and climbing the path up the cliff to look back at its expanse. A good time to take a bush walk was when the wind chopped up the surf and whipped the sand along the beach; then we'd head inland where the tracks to the Nikau Grove at the end of Garden Road, and to the Glen Esk waterfall were well maintained and easy for children to walk.

During the summer months there was entertainment to cater for all ages and tastes. As children, we looked forward to Mrs Ketterer's annual fancy dress party; which in years to come proved to be as popular with my own children and their cousins as it was with me and my siblings. The vice versa dance always raised a lot of laughs. I remember being intrigued seeing an older male cousin decked out in make-shift skirt and coconut husk bikini top, complete with makeup. By the time I was a teenager in the mid 60s a band one of my cousins belonged to, played each summer at the Piha surf club dances. Movies were shown at the local hall, down the road from the big store. Patrons lined up well before time to get a seat. The price of the seats reflected the comfort. Seats ranged from basic wooden fold up chairs to the more upmarket padded iron seats, which had come from His Majesty's Theatre in Auckland. The films often broke down, resulting in catcalls and verbal taunts from the audience to the ushers; who moved through the theatre with their torches to the shouts of "Florence Nightingale", looking for the disruptive element. From time to time some of the more unruly patrons were evicted from the theatre. It all became part of the entertainment. The hall was also used for Mass during the height of summer. A priest from the Catholic church in Glen Eden used to drive out each Sunday to say Mass amongst posters advertising the upcoming films.

Summer and Piha went hand in hand in the halcyon days of my childhood. The anticipation of exhilarating foaming surf, the quiet water of the lagoon, black sand heated by the sun, brilliant orange red sunsets at the end of the day and the soothing voice of the surf lulling me to sleep, held me over from one Christmas to the next.