

Life on Waiheke Island 1948

By Peter Dale

All rights reserved. March 2014

Auckland was exploding babies in the late forties. There were so many new families that there weren't enough houses to go around. Mostly you had to go on an endless waiting list, or go and stay at the transit camp at Camp Bun in Tamaki along with hundreds of other new families, all waiting to get a state house. As well, a lot of returned men found it really hard to get work with enough pay to look after a family, Dad included. In the end he managed to get a rehab loan from the government to take a lease on the Post Office store at Onetangi on Waiheke Island. We moved down on the Baroona, and caught Stewie Annandale's bus to Onetangi Beach.

The store was set back from the road which ran along the edge of the beach. The Mallinsons lived next door and also owned the shop. Most of the houses along the beach were baches and used only in the summer or for weekends by Aucklanders. Most of the baches were really old. However there were a couple of dozen or so houses that were occupied permanently and these people were the base customers for the store. There weren't enough of them to make a living from. It was the payment that came with post office and the telephone exchange that gave Mum and Dad just enough to live on. Everyone in the whole of Onetangi had to come to our shop for their mail.

When I was 2 ½ my brother came on the scene—a bouncing red head who was eternally happy and loved by the mostly elderly residents who gave him a swing as they came in the door to collect their mail, or cash up their pensions, or chew the fat with Mum or Dad.

A series of uncles washed up as wrecks at our place over the next few years, mostly old digs in need of a bed, quite a few of them P-O-dubs from the Pacific, although Uncle Bruce was in a camp in Germany. They played with me and took me for walks along the beach to Connelly's Hall to meet the bus and collect the mailbags in the mornings. Most of them suffered from one thing or another, wounds or a lack of tucker in the camps or both. All of them were thin, drank whatever was available, smoked like chimneys. A few got a bit of work here and there on the roads, or during haymaking, or pulling down baches that the county said were rat-infested. None of them were married. All of them worshipped Mum who was a bloody good listener and a fantastic cook, so they told me. They brought in flatties that they speared, pippies by the sack full, mullet and snapper from the net. They dug Mum's garden and pulled out the spuds.

As one drifted away, usually to the hospital, another would turn up. Sometimes they were sent on to us by my real Uncle Bob, Mum's brother, who had the milk run on the island. He lived in a one-room shack at Oneroa, had two daughters at that time, my cousins, and was desperate for a son, which he never had, so I guess it was me. He'd take me for a ride and teach me how to dip the ladle in the can to fill the billy for the people who stood out at the road-side when they heard his a-oooo-ga horn which I was occasionally allowed to push. Bob was a bit of a case himself for a while, got wounded in Monte Casino, a gunnery officer, and he heard bells all the time in his ears. He was nearly always happy, and called himself Rich Uncle Bob which he never was.

One of the wrecks that Rich Uncle Bob gave to us was Uncle Allan who didn't have a second name but loved it when I began to call him Uncle. He was a bit older than Dad and really tall but skinny,

with blonde hair like Dad. When we dug for pippies you could see all his scars—some of them wounds and the rest from twenty-five operations after the wounds. He was a special P-O-dub and I had to be quiet in the afternoons so he could have a lie-down, because he was from Changi which was a word that Mum and Dad said very quietly, knowing I would understand and therefore not ask him about it which I never did. Anyway, he said, only on the inside, when I asked him if his scars hurt much. He was a gun filleter and could split mullet and snapper like nobody's business and hook them up for the smoker. Mum said Uncle Allan was a convalescent which she knew all about because she was in the army at North Head during the war.

Uncle Allan used to help Dad out on his vegie run around the island, mostly stuff from the garden like spuds and onions and carrots and salad stuff like tomatoes and lettuces. He also sold fruit that came off the Baroona or the Motunui, mostly bananas from Fiji and that. Dad had an ancient Morris van with wooden sides and yellow headlights that didn't hit the road, so he had to hold a torch out the window to come home. Dad also worked right through the weekends in the store to serve the bach people and deliver all their groceries. They always wanted broken biscuits for their baking so Mum and Dad used to spend hours breaking them up out of the big tins from Bycrofts, and putting them in brown paper bags. Mum said at Christmas they had a month to make a year's wages.

Sunday afternoons after the bach people went home we all went down the beach, got mussels and put them in a four gallon tin along with a whole lot of spuds and onions in sea water and had a great boil-up. It was called 'root de guri' which was Eyetie for dog stew according to Rich Uncle Bob who knew stuff like that and could speak Eyetie. Over there he got a taste for red wine. Waiheke was a dry area but there was an old Dally, Grd Grdiska, who had a tiny vineyard over at Rocky Bay. When Mum and Dad ran out of home brew or Rich Uncle Bob wanted some wine we'd all go over there and they would taste some and buy a flagon. Grd Grdiska sold two wines—this year's and next year's, and according to Mum the war would've been shortened by years if he'd been sent over to poison the German army.

Home brew was made in a spare copper out the back of the wash-house and was always on the go one way or another. Most of it went into 4 ½ gallon kegs, called pigs. At Christmas times you had to bring the flagons back if you wanted any refills. You had to go around the back of the shop for flagons and no tick.

When you turned five you had to go on the bus from Connelly's Corner to Ostend School. Mr Billings drove the school bus. There was me, Neville Davis, Carol Billings, and Julia Day who I worshipped because she came into the shop and called me Sprat. She wore shoes to school. Her family had a sheep farm that went from Pie Melon Bay to Manowar Bay. The Billings had a general store and garage up on the hill above Onetangi and had been trying for years to get the licence to run the Post Office and Exchange. Mum and Dad didn't know that at the time.

At school we had the flag and marching into class in our bare feet. Our teacher was Miss Champion and she taught me to read. All the kids on the island were in that class and when you got too old you went up to Auckland to Epsom or Mt Albert. Our dental nurse was Miss Ponsonby who came over on the Baroona to give you the buzzer. The buzzer worked on a bike wheel which she pedalled as she buzzed. Mum said it would only hurt when she changed feet because she was tired, but I wasn't so sure. I got a lot of black fillings and a stamp on my hand.

When I was six my sister Bubby was born. I spent hours looking at her and playing with her and reading my Janet and John schoolbooks to her. Then all of a sudden things changed. Mr Billings got the licence so we couldn't afford to stay at the store. We got poor straight away and had to move into a bach that belonged to the Wimsets. Dad got a job at Morrie Black and Mathesons in Auckland and left at five in the morning on the bus for the ferry and got home at eight at night.

Mum wouldn't go into Billings so she always sent me in for flour, tea, sugar, Sunlight Soap and put it on tick for Dad to settle up on Saturdays. After school, Mum would meet me at Connelly's Corner and we would dig for pippies or get mussels, or dig vegies from the garden at our old place which the Mallinsons had closed, but they were happy for Mum to have her garden until they sold it. I was allowed to do the mincer to make pipi fritters which were my favourite. When Dad came home he would have a chop or some sausages and then he would kiss the three of us good night. I had the top bunk, Chris below me and Bubby in the cot. Man, I loved the smell of chops. But then again Dad didn't get Happy Joker puddings like us kids, Mum said.

But we got lots of mutton chops when Mum worked in the Day's shearing shed if old Mrs Tooley could look after the two kids while I was at school. Mum walked to the Days which was about an hour each way, but sometimes she got a ride home on their tractor. She would cook the chops and put them all in the meat safe and reheat them when she needed them. You knew it was the last of them when you got them curried.

Saturday nights there was often a party down at Connelly's Hall. Dad and Mum would sing around the piano for hours. They loved a party. I knew every song off by heart. Blue Smoke was my favourite or maybe Pawn Shop on the Corner. All the kids would go to sleep under the trestles. When it was home-time I sat on Dad's shoulders while he carried Chris, and Mum carried Bub.

Neville Davis was my idol. He called me Sprat as well, and because I was the only boy around he tolerated me. When I was seven he was nearly twelve. Nev's dad was a fencer and real handy. When you went round there after school you usually got a mutton sandwich with thick slabs of bought-bread to wrap your laughing gear around.

Our favourite thing apart from running around the rocks was flatty spearing. Nev had this long broomstick with a nail on the end with the head sharpened off. I carried the sugar sack and generally looked out for flatties. Even at high tide we pretty often got some and we always went halvesies even though I was a Sprat, because it was a team job. But we often lost them because the flatty wriggled off before you could get your hands on it and chuck it in the sack.

Nev's mum got a curtain rod delivered on the bus, from Auckland, which she put up in Nev's bedroom. He took it down and put one end in the vice and we pinched it up to a point. Then he cut a nick out the rod about an inch down and levered it out a bit to make a barb. That way we could use it and still put it back up without his mum knowing. It made a beaut flatty spear because the fish couldn't wriggle past the barb. You just pulled the flatty right up the rod and took it off the the top and chucked it in the sugar sack! Then Nev stood on a flatty and tried to spear it, but he got it through the webbing of his toes. He never said much, just that he'd stabbed himself and we had to get to the beach. We walked through the water like a three-legged race with me holding his leg and the flatty, trying to keep it off the ground. When we got to the dry sand, Nev told me to run for his

dad but if he wasn't there, sneak into the workshop and grab the hacksaw. On no account was I to say anything to his mum, because we'd be in it deep.

Not liking the 'we' bit, I ran like the wind into the workshop where Mr Davis was welding. He must've seen something in my face because he sprinted out of the shed down to the beach and beat me by miles. He met me on his way back carrying Nev, grinning all over his face and told me to get the flatty sack and come to the workshop because we were in it up to our ears.

When I got there, Nev was up on the work bench. His dad was trying to crimp the barb back into place so he could pull the fish off, but it wouldn't. If it wouldn't then neither would Nev's foot, he said. So he cut the rod off with a hacksaw just below the barb. It took ages. He told Nev to take a deep breath, and yanked the rod out. Apart from wincing, Nev never said anything at all, just looked at the little hole. Nev's dad told me to nip over to the line and grab a tea-towel which I held around Nev's toes to keep the wound clean. He put some ointment on, wound a bandage around Nev's foot and put a footy sock over it to hold it in place.

Nev's dad told me to go into the kitchen and ask Nev's mum if there was a chance of some sandwiches for three hungry men in the workshop, while he went into Nev's bedroom for a looksee. Nev added, 'and don't say nothing.'

Mrs Davis laughed when she heard me, and said they always send the littlest one. When she got the sandwiches together Mrs Davis gave them to me on a tin plate and told me we shouldn't have stayed in the water so long because I was shivering. I was shivering all right! While we scoffed the mutton sandwiches, Nev's dad came back in from doing a bit of measuring in Nev's room. He gave us a wink I'll never forget, and welded the end-bit back onto the curtain rod. So long as you never opened the curtains too quick, it stayed up and our arses never got the kicking Nev's dad said we deserved. All Mrs Davis said was that Nev should be more careful in future. Mr Davis dropped me off at our place with all the flounder! It was the old Morris that Dad used to have.

Mum and Dad weren't all that happy, what with Dad working up in Auckland, and never being home and Mum with no phone and just us kids and no money for the bus into Oneroa, and Onetangi being a dead end. They were keen to move on if they could but finding a house in Auckland was like finding rocking horse shit, Dad said. And Wimset's was small with no front room to speak of. Mum boiled the washing in the preserving pan on the wood stove because there was no copper and no wringer. And Dad was a bit sore that Mum wouldn't move to Whitianga, his home town where there was a new house for us and a job for Dad. Mum said it was a scandal town and Dad sort of agreed so that was that.

Then one afternoon while I was playing with her in the hallway after school, Bubby walked. My sister Rosie wasn't a baby any more. She just stood up and walked to me, arms out. Mum's hands were covered in flour but she picked Rosie up and hugged me and Chris as well, and burst into tears. That night, when Dad came home he gave Mum a letter that had been waiting for days at the Billings. It was from Nanny. She'd found a house to rent in Browns Bay, close to her place. Mum was crying so we all started up as well. She came in and told us we were going to have another baby in the house and we were moving up to be with Nanny, and if we were very good we might see the Queen. And Chris would start school there and I could take him and we'd see Nanny every day before school. And that's my story about life in Onetangi.

