

“All Tickets Please”.

At the start of the annual school holidays, my two sisters, young brother and I were always excited and looked forward to the train journey from Wellington to Napier.

That was where our aunt lived with her five children.

We spent all our school holidays with them, as my mother and her sister were very fond of each other, and we cousins were close in age and shared a common upbringing.

Holidays stood for sunny days, good food and plenty of it, and endless adventures, out of sight of any watchful adults.

The night before the journey meant that sleep wasn't easy as the excitement of going on holiday had been building within us as the end of school approached.

Finally dropping off to sleep, we were woken by our mother in hushed tones in the early morning darkness.

Our quiet voices reflected a quiet part of the day, with just the occasional bird tweet interrupting the silence.

We'd stumble about, half asleep still, as we ran a facecloth over our faces, brushed our teeth, got ourselves dressed in our best clothes and ate some breakfast, always keeping an eye on the clock as the railcar wouldn't wait for us if we weren't there.

With our coats on, bags in hand, and our father carrying a couple of suitcases, we'd all trail down the 31 steps from our house to the car, keeping our voices and excitement low, so

as not to disturb the neighbours, who lived in front of us and whose bedroom windows we had to pass.

We children would climb into the back benchseat of the old Black Chevy as our mother settled in the passenger seat, the train tickets safely tucked inside her purse, and our father placed the suitcases in the huge roomy boot of the car.

We'd head off to Wellington Railway Station, inhaling the familiar petrol fumes of the old car, in the early morning light which was just starting to throw a glow around the suburban shadows.

We watched our father put the suitcases into the baggage car, and followed our mother along the platform to the train steps. Our father helped us up the two thin metal steps into the greasy red carriage. The steps were very wide apart for small legs, and we climbed up them rather than stepped, with the aid of a metal handrail and our father's reassuring hand.

The smell of grease and diesel filled our noses and we would pause to look down at the large gap between the train and the platform, wondering where the train wheels were hidden.

Our mother found our allocated seats, then our father stowed our bags above our heads in string-netting baggage racks.

It seemed as if he would hang on to the last minute, to say his final goodbyes, before heading off to work, ignoring the loudspeaker voice saying that the train was about to depart the station. We children would always be worried that the train would take off with him on it,

but our mother usually allayed our fears.

On each side of the carriage aisle, were bench seats, upholstered in dark red vinyl. They had a shiny metal knob on the top to grip and push or pull the seatback into a forward facing or backward facing position, depending on which direction the train was headed.

We'd all bunch up on the seats; the three older ones sharing one seat and the youngest sharing the facing seat with our mother.

There was usually discussion over who sat next to the window and it was tempting to put our small feet up on the opposite seat but a stern word from our mother nipped that in the bud.

The train journey was the only time of the year that we children were given the treat of a comic each, and to share a big bag of Minties.

These had to be balanced on our laps and held onto as the carriage swayed and jostled along the tracks.

The final announcement was made of the train's departure and our father would hurry off. He'd wave at us through the window as a whistle sounded and the train drew away from the platform, smoothly and almost silently as we began our journey.

The train slowly gathered speed as we crept past the railway yards, scattered with bits of rusting iron, wooden telegraph poles, oil barrels and obsolete parts of machinery. The newly risen sun shone on aluminium piping and petrol-coated puddles of stagnant water.

The ticket collector would eventually arrive through the door at the front of our carriage, walking down the aisle, saying in a loud voice

“All tickets please” and our mother would hand over the tickets for the five of us.

He would clip them with a metal clipper attached to a chain that joined onto his belt and hand them back, leaving a small odd-shaped hole in the ticket.

Wellington Harbour, in glittering glory, turned into green bush-clad hills and suburbia. Tunnels came upon us suddenly, giving us all a fright as the outside scenes we were gazing at changed to pitch black with a loud roar and the smell of diesel fumes entering the carriage through open windows. Passenger’s arms quickly shot up in the air to close them.

Thankfully the lights in the carriage stayed on and we were bathed in a gentle glow that we didn’t notice when outside the tunnels. Just as quickly, the dark outside flicked back to daylight and we all felt relieved when we could see the views again.

Suburban life was soon separated by farm life. Green paddocks, horses, sheep, farm machinery, untidy houses and their untidy yards. Glancing spells of bush and waterfalls, then more farmland.

The backs of businesses came into view. Car parks and rubbish bins. Rotting wooden fences and new steel gates. This meant that we were approaching another town.

The train didn’t stop at every town, and the only way we knew we were dropping off or collecting people, was when the ticket collector walked importantly down the aisle, announcing in a loud official

voice, "Next stop" At this announcement passengers would stand and hurriedly gather their belongings together, reaching up into the baggage racks to grab their bags and parcels and exit the train onto the platform, some heading towards the baggage car, and some smilingly into the arms of loved ones.

Our train journey would continue. We'd finish our comics, even after swapping them with each other. We'd use the toilet, lurching from side to side down to it and then back, holding onto the seats. We'd drink from the water dispenser on the wall that released water into small paper cups.

By now we would be hungry.

"How many stops to Palmerston?" "Are we nearly there?"

We knew that lunch was at the Palmerston North Railway Station, and that meant that we were officially halfway to our holiday!

This was where passengers could get off the train and join a long queue of hungry people, all wanting to buy a pie, sandwiches and a cup of tea in a thick white Railway's Corporation cup and saucer set. The crockery was made to last. At least to survive a drop on the floor of a jiggling train carriage.

Our mother would take our older sister with her to help carry our lunch back to the train. We would watch them disappear and blend into the crowded distance.

That left us three younger ones fretting, nervously looking at each other but not speaking. The rows of empty seats and the quiet ticking

of the cooling engine added to our feelings of being abandoned.

Would the train start to move? Would it leave without us? What would become of us? Where would we get off the train?

Each of us was in our own world of worry and it was an anxious time as we watched passengers come back to the train balancing cups and saucers and pies on plates, but with no sign of our mother.

Eventually we would spy our mother and sister coming towards our carriage, their arms laden.

Whew! Hooray! Lunch!

We'd continue our journey through the Manawatu Gorge and ask our mother several times about how many trains had gone over the side as we'd peer nervously down onto the narrow strip of river.

With our tummies full and 'wake me up when we get there' sleepy eyes, we'd be soon lulled to sleep by the soothing clackety clack of the wheels connecting with rails.

The Hawkes Bay summer temperatures would eventually wake us. Our carriage had become hot and stuffy and the outside landscape had changed. We started to recognise familiar landmarks; dry brown hills, limestone outcrops, swamps and Pa sites, Te Mata Peak, Sugarloaf and Hawke Bay.

"Final stop Napier!"

We all became caught up in the hustle and bustle of leaving the train, collecting our belongings and making sure that nothing was left behind on our seats.

We'd clutch the prized comics that we'd give to our cousins and follow our mother down the carriage aisle and gingerly climb down the steps onto the solid ground of the platform.

Our smiling uncle was there to greet us.

Now what did our suitcases look like?

By Denise McBride 16/09/2020