

Peter and Maggie Tait

Bill Tait

February 2009

These are my memories of growing up with my parents Peter and Maggie Tait in Island Bay, Wellington.

My father Peter Tait and mother Margaret Mouat were born in the Shetland Islands and were married there. Times were hard in Shetland during the 1920s and 1930s. My father went into the merchant navy, and my mother both before and after her marriage went into service, working in Edinburgh and at Voe House in Shetland.

My father after having visited many places in the world with the merchant navy had a good idea as to where he would finally settle with my mother and my elder sister Agnes. One of his favourite places was Freemantle in Australia where he saw the possibility of getting involved in fishing. This was the time of the Great Depression, so many Shetlanders were thinking of leaving home to settle anywhere they could see many more opportunities.

During this time my Dad's eldest brother, Uncle Jack, had decided to set his family up in Island Bay, Wellington, along with many other Shetlanders and Italians. Uncle Jack soon had his own boat called The River Nile with another Shetlander John Pottinger. He soon persuaded my Dad to join them so Dad joined them, leaving Mum and my sister Agnes back in Shetland. The other Shetlanders who arrived during that time and later, included my Dad's sister Aunty Elsie and her second husband Andrew Tait (no relation) and her family Dick, Jack, and Oliver. She had another boy Tom who died young.

They settled in Beach Street and Uncle Jack had a house in Brighton Street. His family was Sir Peter, Johnnie, Tom and Barbara and they lost another girl, Kitty, who died young.

There were many other Shetlanders who came over including Uncle Johnnie, Mum's youngest brother, who lived with us as long as I can remember. We also had another lodger, Jack Mouat (no relation), who later became Dad's partner when The Wild Duck was built. Another popular family member was Big John who was the son of my father's eldest sister Barbie.

For a short time Tommy, who was another one of Dad's brothers, came to New Zealand and was employed droving up-country. He often came with his horse and dogs and stayed with Aunty Elsie in Beach Street.

As soon as Dad settled he organised the building of our first home at 178 Queen Drive in Island Bay where Elsie and I were both born. Mum and Agnes arrived before the house was finished so they rented rooms above the dairy in Humber Street. Later on Dad sold 178 and we shifted to 186 Queen's Drive. We were very happy there. It was a larger house and I finally had my own room. After Dad died in 1953 Mum purchased 180 Queens Drive, a lovely little home for her.



All this coincided with the Great Depression so they had very little to come and go on. Dad was earning very little on the River Nile, but they seemed to make ends meet with Mum's efforts in looking after our boarders. I can't remember us going without anything. My Mum was very adept at making food go a long way and of course we had plenty of fish. Mum as you all would know was a wonderful knitter, so we always had plenty of warm clothing. My mother made quite a name for herself during the war knitting gloves, socks and balaclavas for service men. She belonged to a group who met regularly at the Salvation Army Hall.

Mum never lost her accent and some of my friends found her very hard to understand. She was a regular worshipper at the Island Bay Baptist Church and made sure that we attended.

Dad stayed on The River Nile for quite a while until Uncle Jack made a decision to move to Napier with John Pottinger and Dad started a partnership with Jack Mouat and they bought a boat named the San Marco. Unfortunately the San Marco drifted ashore in a big southerly storm. They only salvaged the engine.



Not long after this terrible tragedy, Jack Mouat and Dad built the Wild Duck at Balaena Bay. I remember the launching, with Mum smashing a bottle of champagne on her bow. They ran the Wild Duck for many years with the help of a young boy and did very well.

In my early life I have great memories of all the Shetlanders having a wonderful social life, always in each others houses and helping each other.

Dad was really respected by the Italian fishermen and had some very good Italian friends. On the day of his funeral not a boat left Island Bay; they all attended Dad's funeral. During the war their home was an open house for all the young Shetland boys who came out on the merchant boats. Mum made them a big pot of stap made from boiled ling and their livers all mashed together and served with floury tattles - a special Shetland dish. By the time the war started, not only had Uncle Jack gone to fish in Napier, Uncle Andrew and Auntie Elsie and their family also went to Napier with their boat the Norna.

Fishing during the war was quite prosperous for Dad as the Italian boats were only allowed to fish in daylight hours. The big day of the month was when Dad went into the Fisherman's Co-op to collect the month's earnings. Dad was a director of the Coop so always made a big day of it. He always came home with the brown envelope in the pocket of his gabardine coat and I always met him when he got off the tram at the terminus. He always had with him a big bag of mixed lollies that he would have bought at Woolworths or Selfridges in Cuba Street on the way home.



The next day was called Square Off Day when Dad, Mum and Jack Mouat and later Warren Shand sat at the kitchen table. Mum would open the envelope and put the notes on the middle of the table and distribute the money in three even piles - Dad's share, Jack Mouat's share, and a share for the boat. Mum would take Dad's share and the boat's share. Jack would take his share and pay Mum for his lodging.

Another adventure for us was when Dad took a group of Brethren people over to the Pelorus Sounds where they all stayed at a holiday park. Mum and us children went with them and stayed in a bach. We all had a great time. I was very impressed because we had Weet-Bix instead of porridge for breakfast.

Other events we always attended as a family were the Shetland picnic at Eastbourne, the Sunday School picnic at Maidstone Park, Upper Hutt, and the Labour Day sports held at Newtown Park. Agnes really enjoyed these picnics as she won every running race she competed in. We also attended the Shetland Society's dances at the IOOF Hall in Courtenay Place. This was a great meeting place for all the Shetland Islanders that met in Wellington.

Dad was also a member of Lodge Zetland made up in those days of mostly Shetlanders. He really enjoyed Lodge and would never miss a meeting if he could. His funeral was taken by a Shetlander, Rev Jim Cumming. Something that really stuck in my mind was Jim when he said Dad was a quiet man who made his mark by standing in the background, a wonderful man. I will never stop missing my Mum. She was a capable, strong woman who spoilt me rotten. My only wish is that at times I showed her more appreciation.