

Hello fellow members of the Coasters' Club.

My name is Emma Smallholme and I am now a Coasters' Club member. I am writing the memories of my Granddad conveyed to me at Christmas 2014 with the aim of sending them to the Coasters' Club to share with other Coasters.

My granddad is 89 and now lives in a rest home in Hamilton and just how I am involved is worth mentioning. A lady (we don't know her) who lives in Melbourne has been sharing the Coasters' Club postings and a good friend of our family in Dunedin receives the posts from her. She in turn shares them with one of the nurse aids at the rest home where Granddad lives, and he every day brings out the ipad and allows the people in the home, many with West Coast connections, to view and read the posts. They love it.

When I called in to see Granddad at Christmas he asked me to take some notes and pass them on to the Coasters' Club. Please accept that these are his words and some I would not have included but he would have growled, as no doubt one day he may well read this again. I have changed the spelling on some names

As Granddad tells it:

My name is Rob Smeaton and I am 89 living in Hamilton and in good health some days. My wife, who I married in 1955, was Sarah Johnson and she sadly passed away from cancer in 1996. This same scourge has claimed my two sons as well.

We had two sons, both deceased, and a daughter Vivian, who married Craig Smallholme and she had a daughter Emma (my granddaughter) who is the apple of my eye. When I read some of the comments on the Coasters' Club my first thought was "well my story is hardly worth telling but a couple of old friends said do it any way."

I want to first tell you about my dad John Smeaton as it was him that first brought the family to the Coast, Otira to be exact. It was always hard to get information from either Mum or Dad but it seems that when the government decided to build a tunnel under the hill at Otira it called tenders.

It was 1907 and one of the biggest firms in the country, John Mclean and Sons, won the contract with a tender price of £599,794.



Otira was originally a stop on the Cobb and Co stagecoach from Canterbury to the West Coast. The railway line was to be built from Greymouth to Otira, with the pass navigated by coach, until the railway tunnel opened.

In 1912 John Mclean and Sons petitioned the government to release them from the contract as they ran into a block for labour from the unions of the day. They were successful with being released by the government but the union problems caused the company to fold.

The public Works department took over the job in 1912 but in 1915 World War 1 drained most of the young men from Otira and only a small crew remained.



My Dad enlisted with a number of others in 1915 but was discharged soon after because of a serious leg injury received in basic training. This failure to fight at Gallipoli haunted him for the rest of his life. He told me of the men that left such a hole in Otira, men like his best mate and a man he grieved for until he died Neil SELLARS who lived at Kotuku, on the Otira line . Neil died of his wounds 14 June 1916 in France.

Then there was Edward PRIEST, Otira. His next of kin was J. Priest (father), and he lived on Baxter's, Otira Line, Greymouth . EDWARD died of his wounds 29 March 1918 in France, aged 25.

James O'CONNOR, railway guard, Otira. James' next of kin was Edward O'Connor (father), who lived on Revell Street, Hokitika. James died of his wounds 24 August 1915 at Gallipoli and John McLEAN, of Otira township. John was killed in action 27 April 1915 at Gallipoli aged 29.

John MacRAE, Otira embarked from Wellington 2 April 1917. John was killed in action 8 October 1918 aged 34 at Le Cateau, France, as did John FREEBAIRN, Jacksons, (which was on the Otira line). He embarked on 9 October 1915. John was killed in action 19 May 1916 Somme, France.

Edgar DAVIS who embarked from Wellington 9 October 1915. His mum was his next of kin: Mrs M. Davis (mother), Otira. Edgar died of his wounds 28 December 1915 aged 20, in Egypt, and Frank 'Nugget' Boland. He came to New Zealand some fourteen years earlier and engaged in mining on the West Coast. On the Otira tunnel being started he went there and was one of the first to enlist from Otira along with my Dad. Frank was Killed In Action at Gallipoli 31 July 1915 aged 38.



I recall how Dad would cry on ANZAC Day every year. He would head to the pub with his mates, come home legless, and have a fight with Mum. She would always punch him, he would give her the bash, then it would all settle down for another year when the same thing would happen again. Mum was a feisty Irish girl who gave as good as she got but Dad was never the same after so few of the boys he knew so well never came home.

During construction of the tunnel, Otira housed about 600 workers and their families. My dad was one of these as he had shifted in from Wellington with his new wife Margaret for the work in 1909.

By 1920/21 the tunnel was complete as a tunnel but not a railway and the government then called tenders for the big steam generator to be built at Otira plus 6 electric trains and about 14km of electric line. English Electric from London got the job. They used Frederick S Greensheilds, a New Zealand company, to do the work and my dad went to work for them until 1924. From 1924 until he retired he worked for the Railways as a store man.



THE POWER HOUSE, OTIRA.

And now about me:

I came along in 1932 and had a very happy life as a kid. Otira was a town where the population peaked at about 600 and by the 1950s had around 350 and I guess these days it's about 40. As a kid we knew everybody in town and generally it was their job that identified them and everybody in town knew us. Forgive me for only recalling the men's names but it was an era when we did not see much of the ladies unless it was a day out or the annual railway picnic. Then like now the women wielded enormous power over the home life.

In town Mr Adams was the train examiner. Leonard Ashton was a porter, Bill Banks was the surface man and did a good job looking after those that were finding things tough. He helped my Dad on a number of occasions especially when a lady turned up with a wee girl she claimed was my sister. I never heard much more about this as dad suggested I go hunting for a few days which I did. Mary Brighton lived next door to us. I don't recall much about her either. Ted Burton was also a porter and he lived at number 548 which was a very infamous address. Clifford Crawford was our first Traction electrician and he lived at 524 next to Albert Egan. His house was on the railway side either 554 or 555 and he was the pay clerk. James Gordon worked with me as a labourer and Frank Hedges was also a labourer and lived in the house on the river side down towards hall end. Ian Horne was along the street and another porter, as was John Penman who lived at 555.

Our family, the Smeaton family, lived on the railway side next to Peter Alexander & Mary Vallance and the last one I recall was Norman & Olive Walters as they cleaned the carriages and we sometimes helped. They lived at 537.

I loved school and it helped shape me for the years that followed. Some of the people I remember most were a little younger than me.



Bill Delaney, Johnny Carr, Gordon Barker, Ross Hold and Wayn Machon to name just a few. We always had tea after the afternoon train had arrived and Dad came home so we had a lot of time in the summer to explore, often up until 10pm.

In summer the garden was very important but as soon as it was fine and when the chores were finished we were off. It shaped my life, the urge to act quickly when the weather came right as mostly it was overcast or rained. By the time I was 13 Dad let me use his 303 and we would head away hunting to knock over a deer which was always shared amongst the street. Others did the same as there were no freezers in those days.

We went tramping and often went across the tops and dropped into the top of the Taramakau River where we would see herds of 100 plus deer.



This led to our first money making venture as we shot deer and the government would pay us for the tails plus supply the 303 ammo. The money funded our trips to Greymouth. The John Wayne movies and those big 6 penny ice creams. We would fish in the Taramakau for trout and often picked up a stray sheep or two at the same time. My mother told me we

had to stop that as the local butcher called in in his old Chevy Ute to tell her someone had been rustling stock downstream a bit. Oops.

Winter was always cold and wet and my most vivid memories are keeping the coal and wood shed well filled.

Like my Dad and his Dad I started work for the Railways in 1947 as a 15 year old. It never occurred to me until much later that the Railways was in many ways the government's unemployment scheme and unemployment was non-existent. By 1952 I was riding the guard carriage to town (Greymouth) and to the big events like the Kumara Races, rugby matches and of course the dances which were always held in the community halls.



It was on one of these trips in 1945 that I first met my future wife Sarah Johnson. We had gone to the big dance at the Stillwater hall which had a floor that sways and rolled like a big earthquake. She thought I was a bit of a yahoo but that all changed as we became the best of friends for the rest of her life.

I married Sarah in 1955 against the wishes of the priest and her family as Sarah was a Catholic girl and I was well, like now' an unknown follower of something but not sure what.

My friends and I loved fighting in the pub. When guys came from Grey or Hokitika we always banded together to fight them. If some came from over the hill all of us Coasters banded together to fight them, but compared with the cowardly thugs we have today we were angels.

Every year without fail we would descend on the Kumara Races where we met all our friends and family, drunk until we could not stand up, and bet on some of the slowest horses in the country, but it was a highlight of every year. This was ok until I got married and then if I took the wrong train and ended up in Greymouth for an extra day or two things got very hot at home. Sarah had an Irish streak that came out every so often as the kids found out. She was one tough little lady but I loved her to pieces and best of all she knew it.

In 1960 we got our first car a 1949 Humber super snipe. First trip was to the Kumara Races. I made the mistake of taking a few work mates and on the way home ran off road at Griffin

Creek, but no damage to the car, but a change in transport arrangements from that year on with Sarah very much in control.



Kumara Races



In the early 60s we went to race meetings, rugby trips to Greymouth and to Railway picnics every year. The annual fireworks displays on New Years eve, along with the extended shopping where, for one day a year, the shops opened until 8.30pm in Greymouth and was a treat I will never forget. I would always buy the kids toffee apples. Sarah and me never had them as they would pop out your false teeth.



My greatest Memory.

The pub has long held a special place in the culture of the West Coast. Most men identified with their local pub, where we met with friends and relaxed after the hard physical labour of jobs in mining, forestry, Railways and farming. There were a lot of pubs and most of them were fairly small. In 1947 Greymouth had 21, and even small mining towns like Blackball had three or four. Beer was the drink of us working men, and the price of beer and cigarettes was always a matter of debate. An organised move by the hotels to raise the price of beer in 1947 led to one of the best consumer boycotts ever seen in New Zealand. After a four-and-a-half-month standoff, the hotel keepers caved in, and the price was restored to its old level, for the short term at least. It was a sign of the power that determined consumers and organised labour could wield, and the implications were not lost on politicians and brewery owners. I joined the campaign in Otira in 1947 as a 21 year old and my sole role was to ensure that supplies of home brew were available 24 hours a day. We travelled from Hokitika to Greymouth and even made a trip to Harihari where a local farmer had over 400 bottles available.



In 1966 I shifted the family to Lower Hutt as Sarah had originated there. I am very proud of my two sons, both now deceased, and my daughter who is Emma's mum.

Some things that have changed.

The work force has changed from 80% on the ground and 20% paper shufflers to 20% on the ground and 80% paper shufflers.



Personal responsibility continues to be eroded and the Kiwi we knew as a driven, reliable, able-to-do-anything individuals is being watered down and when the need comes the quality of what we produce as people will be disappointing.



Tax money drives new initiatives that employ people to prove whatever point they wish to make but in reality it's just the Railways of 1945 where the schemes soak up the available labour rather than pay a benefit. There is a reason you can't measure the benefit they bring.



Finally to Emma whom I love dearly, thank you for caring.