

James Raglan Akersten

Photographer of New Zealand

A short Family History



“Self Portrait” by James Raglan Akersten. Photograph courtesy of the Havelock Museum.

by Harry J. R. Dutton

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James Raglan Akersten



The story of James Raglan Akersten is in many ways a sad one – of potential unfulfilled and of a life messed up by alcoholism. In other ways his achievement was considerable and his life wasn't always a mess. Indeed, he was widely regarded as one of the finest landscape photographers of his time. In addition he was a talented amateur actor and singer. In some ways his was a minor triumph over adversity.

James was born on the 8th of August 1855 in London. His father, uncle and grandfather were engaged in a business as ships riggers and provision merchants. This was the heyday of sail, the time when the technology of sailing hit its peak and large “clipper” ships travelled around the world. Within fifty years this was to be almost completely “wiped out” by the advent of the steam ship – but in the meantime business was good.

A large part of the shipping trade was with Australia and around the time James was born his uncle, William Akersten¹, migrated to Australia with his family to start a rigging business in Melbourne. In

Australia, things did not go as well as William had hoped. He saw an opportunity in a very small, new, settlement called “Nelson” in New Zealand. By 1865 James's uncle William was doing quite well and he encouraged his brother, Francis Errick Akersten, to join him with his family. On the 31st of August 1865, James (aged 10) with his parents and siblings departed London as “steerage” passengers on the “Water Nymph”. They would arrive in Nelson on the 16th of December.

After living in London a place like Nelson would have been different in almost every imaginable way! This was a primitive existence in comparison with London. But the climate was superb! (Many say the nicest climate in New Zealand) and the opportunities boundless. At the time London was an overcrowded, stinking, slum. Nelson would have been a paradise.

Sometime around 1869 James went to work as an “assistant” to Mr William Davis a local photographer. At the time photography was very new and very “high tech” but it was evolving very rapidly indeed. William Davis took his profession seriously and in 1866 had made a return trip to London to study the latest techniques. In many ways this was the beginning of photography - this was the time when pre-coated glass plates first became available making photography much more accessible (but you still had to be a dedicated professional). William Davis specialised in portraits of people taken indoors. Of course, initially James's job would have been very menial and involved things like “washing up” darkroom processing trays, setting up the studio and running messages around town. But this was an exceedingly good learning environment. Today there are over 2,000 original glass plate negatives made by Davis in the Nelson Museum – in remarkably good condition.

¹ A biography of William is available at http://www.familytree.john-attfield.com/William_Akersten_Pioneer.pdf

In the 21st century we look at old photographs of people and everyone pictured has a very serious expression. From that we conclude that these were very serious people who never had any fun. This is quite a wrong conclusion. The people weren't much different than we are today – it was photography that was serious! Having your photograph taken was a serious (and expensive) thing – you had to stay perfectly still for a time while the photo was taken! Hence the very serious expressions.

Another thing we tend to forget in the 21st Century is that photography in the 19th Century was a highly technical discipline. Producing a good photograph required mastery of a delicate and intricate technology combined with a thorough and precise approach. After that you could think about things like artistic composition! James obviously mastered the technique very well but also he had a “flair” for composition.

Davis's business didn't do as well as it might and in early 1875 he moved to Wellington. Sadly, only a few months later Davis committed suicide. There had been a sustained economic recession combined with a long period of bad weather. People didn't get their photographs taken in bad weather. Davis was completely “broke”. James went to work for another Nelson photographer – Mr. D. M. Isaac.

The “Nelson Artizans Association”

The Nelson “Artizans Association” was something of a cross between an amateur theatrical group, a service club, a “school of arts” and a masonic lodge. One of their principal activities was to run “entertainments” (plays and concerts) in aid of charitable causes on a regular (monthly) basis. According to press reports these were of very high standard. James became involved in every aspect of these productions. His acting performances were commented on in the press on several occasions as being “outstanding”. In addition he had a good voice and often sang at their concerts.

James didn't confine himself to only the Artizans. He was also very active in the “Nelson Amateur Dramatic Association” acting in a number of productions in which he was reviewed very favorably. In addition he sang at many community events.

Marriage and Family

On the 8th of October 1879, James married **Catherine Marie Mercer**, the daughter of a local farmer. In due course, four children arrived:

Ivy Charlotte Akersten (born 17th of October 1880) was destined to become a noted pianist and theatrical performer. She married twice and had a child from each marriage.

Leo Hilton Akersten (born 1882) became a printer, married and had two children (but only one of these survived).

Herbert Sefton Akersten (born 1884) became a “carter”. He married in 1908 and had four children. Tragically he was killed in the “Messines Battle” of WW1 on the 8th of June 1917.

Eric Francis Akersten was born in 1889. He married and had two children.

During these years finance was not always plentiful and Catherine took in boarders to help with the budget. Indeed, it seems that she ran a small “boarding house”. There were multiple boarders and she continued to do this through the 1890's in Wanganui and the 1900's in Auckland.



Figure 1 James and Family about 1896. Back Row from left: Bert – Ivy - Leo. Front: Catherine Marie Akersten - Eric - James Raglan Akersten. This is one of the very few surviving photographs where James is seen without a hat!

His own Business

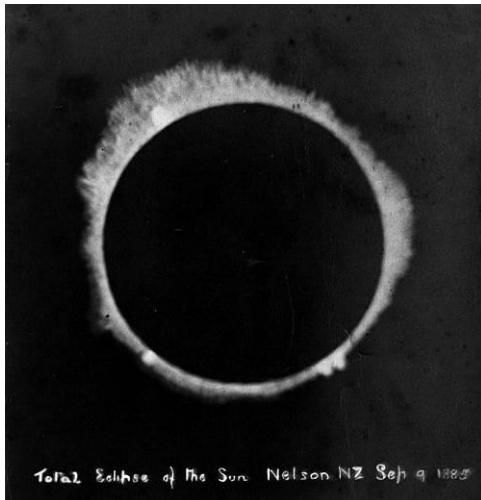
In October 1881 James purchased the photographic business of Mr. Theodore Bloch and went into business for himself. For one reason or another this didn't last very long. In July of 1883 he moved out of his studio. It seems that he went out of business and reverted to working for someone else again. However, there is no record of him going into bankruptcy.

Tyree Studio

The brothers, William and Frederick Tyree had established a photographic business in Nelson as early as 1878. Sometime between about 1883 and 1885 James went to work for Mr William Tyree. This was excellent "advanced training" for James as the Tyrees placed a strong emphasis on outdoor, scenic photography and he would have learned a lot from the experience. James seemed to do well because in 1898 Tyree set up a demountable (moveable) studio in Havelock (Marlborough) with James as his local manager. There was some dispute between James and Tyree and this resulted in James being "fired" in May of 1890 – Tyree placed newspaper advertisements announcing this.

The reason for the dispute between James and Tyree is open to speculation. Possibly it had something to do with James's love of alcohol. Another possibility is that William Tyree had just hired a young lady named Rose Frank who soon after became manager of the studio. He may have felt that Rose was a better person to run the business for him than James. In later years Tyree would leave Nelson for Australia leaving Rose in complete charge. Still later he sold the studio to Rose. In later years Rose was to leave the entire photo

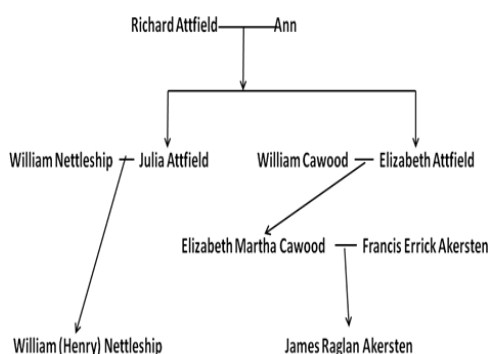
archive to the Nelson Historical Society – an action that resulted in the photographs surviving until the present day.



The photograph shown here was taken by James on behalf of Mr A. S. Atkinson a prominent New Zealand astronomer². It is one of the first successful photographs of a total eclipse of the sun ever taken in the southern hemisphere. In addition to its presentation to the Nelson Philosophical Society it was mentioned in a paper presented to the Royal Society, London³. This photograph is occasionally wrongly attributed to William Tyree. James worked for Tyree at the time but it was James who took and processed the photograph.

Wanganui

On losing his job with Tyree, James decided to try his luck in another town. Wanganui is a small coastal town very like Nelson. Where Nelson is on the north coast of the South Island, Wanganui is on the south coast of the North Island. The towns almost face each other across the Tasman Sea.



One advantage of moving to Wanganui was that James had family there. William Nettlehip had travelled to Australia in 1855 with James's uncle William's family. Later (in 1865) William Nettlehip had migrated to New Zealand and initially worked for James's uncle. In the 21st Century we think this would be a "distant" relationship. Not so in the 19th – people knew and kept in contact with relatives whom today we would not even know existed. By 1890 William Nettlehip had a flourishing retail jewellery and jewellery manufacturing business.

Little record remains but it seems that James got a job with a local photographer and continued with the task of raising a young family. He is on record as having sung at many local concerts although it seems that he no longer acted.

In Wanganui he took up another passtime – the "Wanganui Rifles". This was a very serious militia unit raised for the defence of the town against possible Mauri attack – a few years before there had been such an attack with disastrous consequences. Joining the Rifles was as much a civic duty as it was a recreation. Of course in the small town environment, being seen to be involved in this kind of activity does materially help your chances in business! His cousin William Nettlehip was already a member of the Rifles. Neither cousin was a particularly good shot but

² On the Total Eclipse of the Sun, 9th September, 1885. By A. S. Atkinson. Read before the Nelson Philosophical Society, 2nd November, 1885.

³ Proceedings of the Royal Society of London, Volume 39 1886

they are recorded as having regularly taken part in shooting competitions often competing against each other! James continued as an active member of the Rifles for his entire stay in Wanganui. During his ten years in Wanganui James is mentioned some 75 times in newspaper reports of shooting competition results.

Marlborough

James had had a long association with the Marlborough region. In the 1880's while living in Nelson he had made a number of trips to Havelock to take photographs and towards the end of that decade he had managed a studio for William Tyree there. For a photographer who wanted to specialise in outdoor scenery this would be a superb place to work. As the proverbial crow flies, Nelson is only 40 kilometres from Havelock but as the road goes, even in the 21st century it is over twice that distance. (There is a mountain range in between.) As the 19th Century drew to a close this was still a very long day's travel.

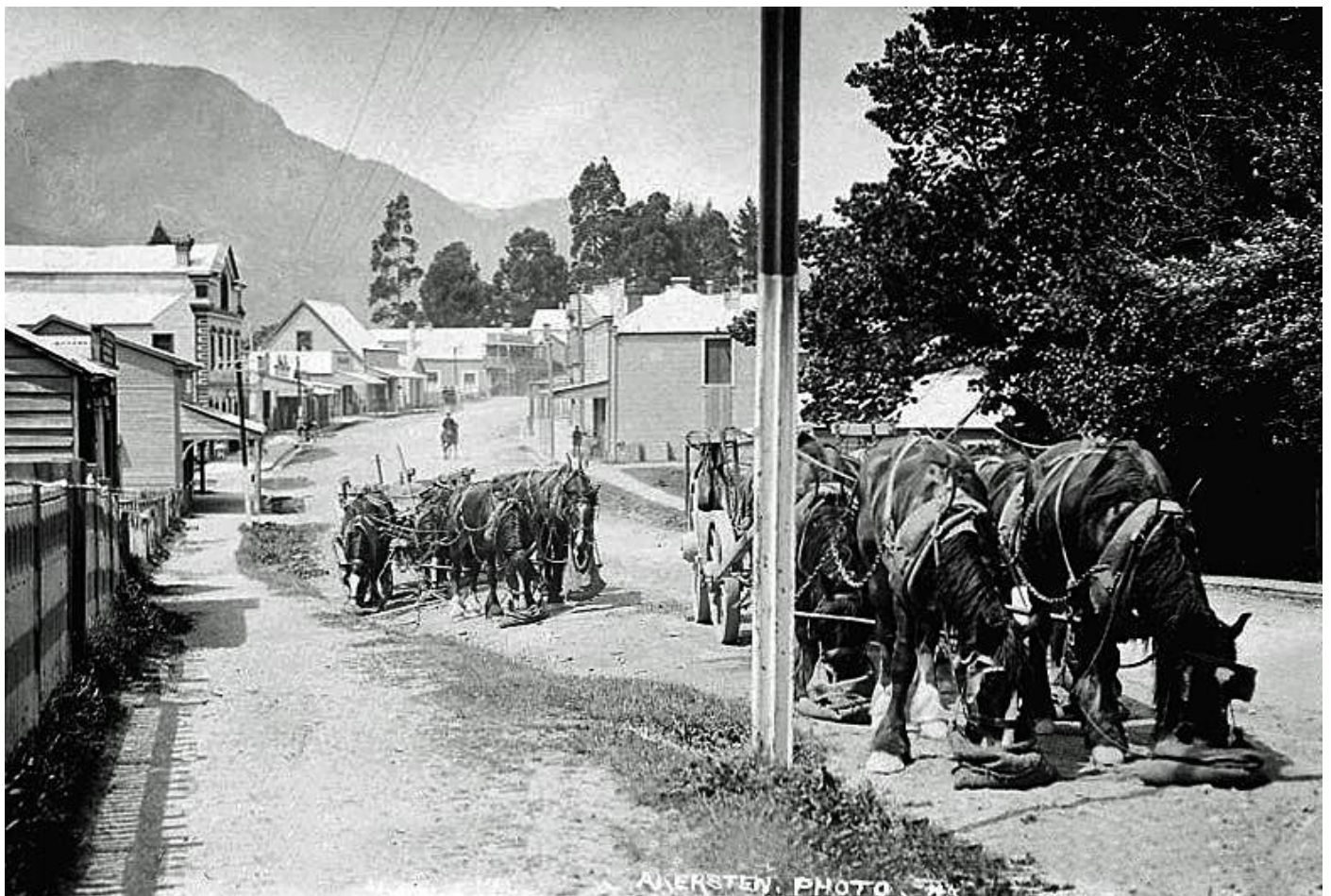


Figure 2. Lucknow St., Havelock. Photograph courtesy of the Marlborough Museum.

It seems that his love of the spectacular scenery kept drawing him back to the Marlborough region. But photography is first of all a business. You can't do nice "artistic things" unless you can feed yourself and your family. In the 19th Century the technology to reproduce photographs in books and newspapers just wasn't there! You could sell large prints for people to hang on the wall – but this was a limited market. You could make scenic "lantern slides" and show them in public halls etc., but this also was limited. So, until around 1900 James (along with most other professional photographers) made his living from taking studio photographs of people! As time went on he did a number of engagements to photograph weddings – but the technology of the time meant this was usually posed photographs of groups taken outdoors (where you had better light).

Technology was developing very rapidly indeed and around 1900 the means became available to print photographs in books. Newspapers followed soon after. This enabled James to pursue the photography he loved most – the outdoors. At the time processing photographs was still a very exacting science which required great skill. Taking the photograph (then as now) involved *artistic judgement* and intuition. This James certainly had.

On leaving Wanganui, James and Catherine moved to Auckland for a short time but then moved back to the South Island (Blenheim in the Marlborough region). It seems that around this time James and Catherine “broke up” as Catherine moved back to Auckland while James stayed in Blenheim. But there were other influences and pressures. Ivy, their daughter, had married and produced a child (Rex Sayers) but the marriage broke up very quickly AND Ivy spent most of her time touring and performing. Catherine took much of the responsibility of looking after her grandson – this would have been much easier to do based in Auckland rather than Blenheim as Ivy’s work was based there.

Divorce was NOT something that James wanted! In 1908 that was just what he got. According to the testimony of his wife, James had had a serious problem with alcohol for many years. The detail is obscure but it seems that he would go on “drinking binges” for weeks at a time – abandoning his family without warning. Afterwards he would come home, apologise profusely and beg forgiveness. James defended the divorce action in court and in so doing made legal history! His defence was that he had been doing much the same thing for many years and that his wife condoned it! It seems that the Judge was not impressed – but the legal opinion is quoted even today as a precedent⁴. The divorce was final on June 19th 1908.

It does seem that something else was going on here – Catherine re-married (to a **John Daniel Murphy**) within a few months of the divorce. It does seem that Catherine only sued for divorce after she had another man “lined up”. After the marriage, no record of any kind has been found of John Daniel Murphy. Then, in October 1913, “Catherine Marie Akersten” married **William Henry Elliott** in a registrar’s office in Sydney, Australia! There is no question at all that this was the same person – but why did she not use the name “Murphy” when re-marrying? A small but interesting mystery.



The Demon Drink

Over time James’s problem with alcohol continued to be a major factor in his life! April 1911 saw him convicted of vagrancy for which he spent a month in Picton Gaol “with hard labour”. In April 1916 he went one better – he was convicted of obtaining liquor during the currency of a prohibition order. For that he was ordered to be committed to the “Inebriates Home” in Rotorua for 12 months!

It seems that James had made serious attempts to keep away from drink. Over his time in both Wanganui and Blenheim he was an active member of the “International Order of Good Templars”. He was secretary of the

⁴ The New Zealand Law Reports, Volume 32. 1908. P1152

Blenheim Lodge. This organisation, the "I.O.G.T.", originated as one of a number of fraternal organizations for temperance or total abstinence founded in the 19th century and with a structure modelled on Freemasonry, using similar ritual and regalia. James often sang at their functions and when he left Blenheim in 1906 he was given a special "farewell dinner" by his lodge.

Photographic Career

For all his problems with alcohol, James's photographic career progressed very well. After 1900, He increasingly emphasised outdoor, scenic photography rather than the portrait work which had been his "bread and butter" in previous times. From 1900 to about 1912 James based himself in Blenheim but spent several periods of time in other places especially Auckland and Havelock. Around 1912 he moved permanently to Havelock as manager of the "Macey" Photographic Studio. He was destined to spend the rest of his life in Havelock. Over the years he took a special interest in Brownlee's sawmill in Carluke. In 1912 he undertook a commission to take additional photographs there. Today some 30 photographs of Brownlee's sawmill taken by James survive in the Marlborough Museum.

In 1913 the "Auckland Weekly News" ran a nation-wide competition for the best collection of "New Zealand views". James won the top award in the competition. Also in 1913 he provided the photographs for a special "Christmas Edition" of the "Weekly Press – New Zealand Illustrated" magazine.

In 1920 he provided the majority of photographs for a book (entitled "Marlborough the Golden") intended to publicise the Marlborough Region. Later he provided all of the photographs for a specially made book presented to the Prince of Wales on his visit to Marlborough. In late 1920 the Chamber of Commerce opened a "Marlborough Bureau" in Wellington – James provided several enlargements for the exhibit and received a commission to take additional photographs of the Kaikoura Coast and mountains for the bureau. In December he is noted as providing photographs of the Marlborough region for 1921 calendars of two companies: Ward and Company (scenes of the Timber Industry) and "Miss Pirrie" (beauty spots in Marlborough).

The Surviving Record

In an amazing piece of good fortune, over a period of around 100 years a number of people cared enough to preserve as many photographs taken in the North of the New Zealand South Island as they could. This has resulted in one of the best collections of historic photographs in the world! The "Nelson Provincial Museum" has a collection of around 1.1 MILLION negatives taken from about 1860 until today but principally between about 1880 and 1920. Other NZ museums and libraries also have collections but these, while quite large by other standards, are very small compared to the collection in Nelson. At the time of writing there are around 400 of James's photographs available in small size formats on the Internet. Most of these are portraits of people taken in Nelson around 1880. However, only a very small proportion of existing photographs have been catalogued or are available on the web. It seems likely that perhaps two or three thousand of James's photographs still exist and will become accessible in the fullness of time.

Most of the existing photographs are in the form of negatives. This is good from one perspective but less so from another. Taking the photograph and processing the negative is/was only half the job. Much of a photographer's skill is needed in the printing stage and of course we can never know what the finished print would have looked like when we only have the negative. Albeit on the large "glass plate" negatives the photographer often "retouched" directly onto the negative and many negatives treated in this way are still available. What we can say is that many of James's later scenic photographs are exposed in such a way as to allow the maximum flexibility in producing the print.



Figure 3. St. James Anglican Church, Havelock. Photograph courtesy of the Havelock Museum.

Religion

The Akersten family in London was predominately “Wesleyan” in its religious observance. In the early 19th century the Wesleyans were not yet completely a separate church but rather an evangelical sect of the Anglican Church. Wesleyans often attended Anglican church services as well as Wesleyan ones. Marriages and Burials were usually held in the Anglican church whereas christenings were held in a Wesleyan “Hall” (at this time there were few Wesleyan churches). James followed in his family’s faith.

It seems that James’s wife, Catherine had a similar background to him since at least two of her siblings were married in Wesleyan churches. Catherine “converted” to Roman Catholicism at some time later and was buried as a Roman Catholic. We don’t know if James ever formally “converted” to Roman Catholicism but certainly the couple’s children were raised in that faith and attended Catholic schools. From 1880 to about 1900 James and Catherine are both noted as taking part in Catholic Church fund-raising events such as concerts.

The suggestion in the family is that the children were sent to Catholic schools because these were the best available schools. Indeed, it seems that James achieved a rather better level of education for his children than many other people of his generation did for theirs! The children “converted” during their school years and Catherine converted at much the same time.

It seems however that James did not convert. In 1919 he is mentioned as singing at an Anglican church fund-raising function. In 1920 he was appointed a warden of St. James Church Havelock. St. James Havelock is an Anglican church.

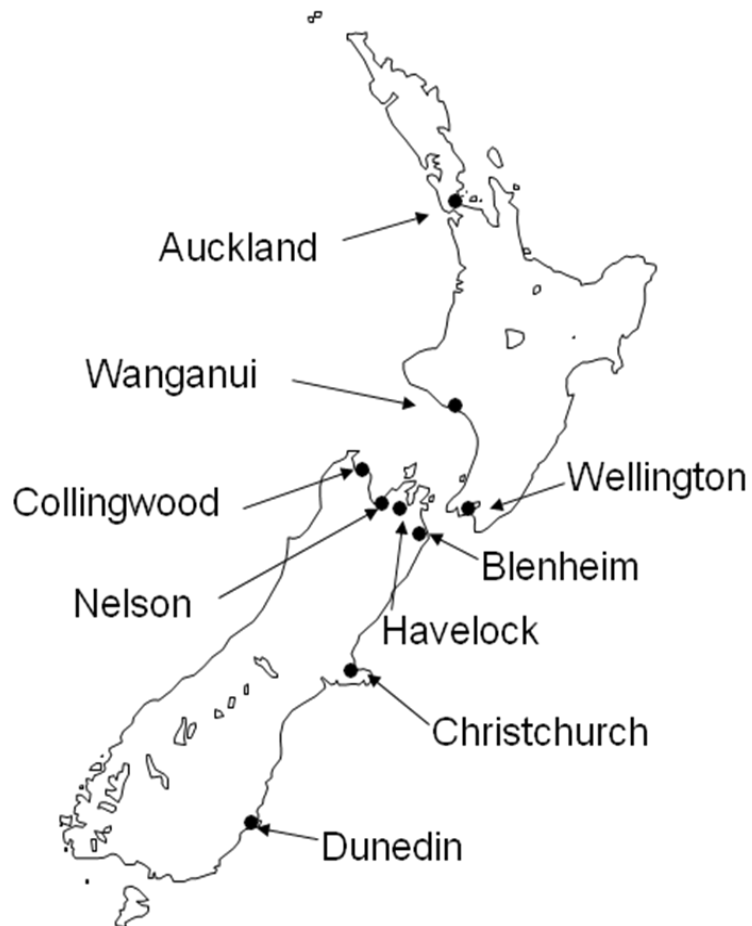
While in Havelock James’s personal life centred around a number of “service clubs”, community organisations and his church. He did not marry again. In July of 1917 he received the news that every parent dreads: his son, Bert, was killed in action in the Messines battle on the 8th of June. It was November before he heard the details. It appears that Bert was a machine-gunner and had been gassed. Before he could be evacuated for medical treatment he was hit by shrapnel from an artillery shell. He died in a field hospital the following day. WW1 was an obscenity beyond description.

James Raglan Akersten

James died on Christmas Day 1928 and was laid to rest in the Havelock Cemetery.



The Scene of all the action:



Ivy Charlotte Akersten



The eldest child of James Raglan Akersten, Ivy was attractive, intelligent, vivacious and musically talented. She only had one personal failing – her choice of men would on two occasions prove disastrous!

Born in October of 1880, Ivy attended “St. Mary’s Select (Convent) School” in Nelson. As a student she was slightly above average in most subjects. However, in music she showed outstanding talent from a very early age. After the family moved to Wanganui in 1890 she continued her education at the “Sacred Heart Select School” in that city. Her skills as a pianist must have developed very well as she is on record as playing at public concerts as early as 1892 (at the age of 11). Sometime around 1896 Ivy moved to Auckland to study piano further.

In 1898, at the age of 18, Ivy started on her professional career. It is reported that she played as accompanist and as a soloist in several concerts in that year. In the press she is advertised as the accompanist for Mr Ernest Goode in October of that year.

It was 1899 when her career really got started strongly. She became associated with Mr Charles Fanning and Mr Walter Rivers. Fanning was an established very talented comedian. Rivers was a baritone. Together Fanning and Rivers organised a touring show which visited Wanganui, Wellington and Auckland in July and August. In September “Charles Fanning’s Royal Specialty Company” arrived in Melbourne for a tour of Australia (Victoria and New South Wales including country areas). Ivy toured with them as resident accompanist.

On return to New Zealand, Ivy spent 9 months touring New Zealand with “John Fuller and Sons Bijou Companies” and then in 1902 she was engaged with James C Bain Company on another tour throughout New Zealand.

It’s important to be clear about the nature of these shows. This was the popular entertainment of its day. Ivy was NOT a serious classical “concert pianist” nor did she aim to become one. She was an extremely talented theatrical pianist/entertainer. Except for a very few “international celebrities”, musicians at this time were regarded by society as tradesmen – similar in status to bricklayers and carpenters. The relatively high social status accorded to classical musicians was a mid-20th century development.

Marriage

Ivy’s hectic touring schedule continued through 1902. This must have included time in Christchurch as she met **Harold Harding Sayers** there. Sayers was a dental technician who although born in New Zealand had been raised in Australia. On the 8th of November 1902 the couple were married in Christchurch. It seems that her father was not present at the wedding as Ivy was “given away” by her brother, Bert.

An entry in the “Cyclopedia of New Zealand” says that Sayers worked for the “Australian Dental Institute” in Christchurch and previously had worked for the “London Dental Institute” in Melbourne. These “Dental Institutes” are worthy of comment. In London there was the “American Dental Institute” in Australia it was

the “London Dental Institute” and in New Zealand it was the “Australian Dental Institute”. Interesting that the name always pointed to a country different from the one they were in. It seems doubtful that they were related to one another but they adopted much the same practices. That is – Harold Sayers probably did not have any formal training in dentistry. These institutes were quite legally allowed to employ “dental assistants” who could perform work “under supervision” of a qualified dentist – but that supervision often meant that they met him once! Over time these assistants started to call themselves “Doctor” and practice independently. In the “Cyclopedia of New Zealand” it is said that Harold spent seven years with the “London Dental Institute” in Melbourne. This is a problem. There are many newspaper references to the “London Dental Institutes” in Brisbane and in Sydney but none in Melbourne.

Pregnancy probably slowed down Ivy’s performance schedule a bit and (right on time) a son, **Leo Marcus Sayers** was born on the 10th of August 1903. The details were not revealed for some years but the pregnancy did not slow Harold Sayers down at all. Harold was having an “affair” with a young lady named “Maritana Emanuel”. Around the end of 1904 Maritana had a baby and registered it as the child of Harold Sayers. On the registration she claimed that she and Sayers were married. Surprisingly, the registrar checked and no record of a marriage was found. In 1907 Maritana was charged in court with having made a false statement. Her defence was that she didn’t know that Sayers was already married and he had promised to marry her! She claimed that Sayers had told her to register the birth that way. By the time the matter got to court in 1907, Maritana had married and was then Maritana Williams. The child was registered in 1907 as “Dolores Emanuel” and the earlier registration deleted. We don’t know exactly when Ivy found out about these events but Harold disappeared around February of 1905 and was never seen (by Ivy) again.

The story that Ivy told in later life was that Harold had gone to the USA to further his study of Dentistry and had been killed in a car accident there. NO records of him travelling to the US (or anywhere else for that matter) have been found nor have any records of his death in the US. The only trace found so far is that someone named Harold Sayers registered a bicycle in Auckland in 1914. In 1916 Harold’s mother died in Perth, Western Australia. In a short obituary Harold is mentioned as being alive and living in New Zealand! On her Death Certificate he is also listed as “living issue”. Nevertheless, a search of New Zealand Electoral Rolls was unsuccessful in finding anyone of that name recorded anywhere in New Zealand at any time in the 20th Century. Similar searches of Australian and US records have had the same result. Ivy filed for divorce in 1911 on the grounds of desertion and the decree was made final on the 27th of September 1912. This suggests that Harold was alive in 1912 otherwise there would have been no need for the divorce.

Little is now known about Harold Sayers but his mother, Louisa Sayers was a widely known and respected business woman of Perth, Western Australia. She was also a talented painter, writer and poet in her spare time. She is noted for having written a proposed Australian National Anthem which was never adopted. Harold’s father was born and married in the UK as “William Sear” and at some time after his marriage (probably on his emigration from England) he changed his surname to “Sayers”.

When at first you don’t succeed...

It took five years but on the 8th of March 1919, Ivy married again to **Albert Young Jacobs**. Their marriage certificate shows Albert’s occupation as “musician”. Nature again took its course and on 29th of April 1922, **Mercia Catherine Jacobs** was born. In the 1919 electoral roll Ivy and Albert are shown living together in West Auckland. Little more is known about Albert. He disappeared sometime soon afterwards and (in 2011) her daughter says that Mercia “never knew her father”.

Career

Vaudeville ("Music Hall") was a form of theatrical entertainment that evolved through the second half of the 19th Century but came to its mature form in the (naughty) 1890's. The key features of Vaudeville that distinguished from earlier entertainment was first that women were present in the audience but perhaps more important it was aimed at the "middle class". Shows usually consisted of many different short "acts" often of widely differing character delivered by different performers. These acts ranged over the whole spectrum but were principally music and dance. Most required a pianist. But the business was precarious for its performers. Shows were delivered by a "company" of performers which often was formed for a single "show" that toured a number of locations and was dissolved afterwards. Other companies were more stable but hired performers only for the run of a particular show. Performers had to continually change companies (and employers). Press advertisements show Ivy as being associated with different companies as frequently as every few months! In the period 1900-1910, Ivy was paid £3 per week plus expenses. On at least one occasion (in 1905) her employer (the Curtis American Novelty Company) just didn't bother to pay her and she had sue to get her money. Of course she accepted short single performance engagements. For example in 1905 she played on a "Grand Moonlight Excursion" with "Wellington Steam Ferry Company" – these ferry trips typically included a wide variety of entertainment and it is likely that Ivy was part of a large group of entertainers on that trip.

This was the era of the early silent movies. These were inevitably very short (10 to 15 minutes) and fitted in well as a new type of "act" within an overall Vaudeville program. Traditions carried through to the provision of "live" accompaniment to the silent films. Musicians played accompaniment to the film and/or a lecturer narrated the story as it unfolded on screen.



Figure 4. Fullers Opera House Auckland as Ivy knew it. Photograph courtesy of “Sir George Grey Special Collections, Auckland Libraries, 4-4787”

It seems that in around 1916 Ivy obtained a more-or-less permanent appointment as musical director/conductor for the Fullers Opera House in Auckland. (NOTE that “Opera” in this context did not mean classical opera – it meant Vaudeville). Unfortunately, on the 3rd of December 1926 the theatre burned down. It was re-built as the “St. James Theatre”. After the loss of the theatre, Ivy with her two children moved to Christchurch. In due time (around 1933), when the theatre was back in business, Ivy returned to Auckland and took up her position as Musical Director again.

Vaudeville as a theatrical entertainment had a very short lifetime! From perhaps the “naughty ‘90s” (the 1890’s) to the 1930’s. Three new technologies came to full flower in the 1930’s: Sound Movies, Sound Recording and Radio. The combination delivered a heavy blow from which Vaudeville style entertainment never recovered. Of course the “depression” didn’t help either. In the years between the end of the ‘20s and 1940 the number of professional jobs available for musicians (of any instrument) cut by perhaps 80%. It is interesting to note that the St. James Theatre was designed for vaudeville but the design was changed *less than a year after completion* to facilitate other forms of entertainment! (Principally to add projection facilities.) By 1940, Ivy had for all practical purposes, retired. (On his enlistment papers for WW2, her son Rex Sayers listed her as a “dependent”.)

Vaudeville was good while it lasted and Ivy could claim to have been there at the beginning and at the end.

Family



Figure 5. Off to the USA to visit her daughter.

After WW2 Ivy settled comfortably into the role of Mother and Grandmother. While not especially close to her son Rex, she was very close to her daughter, Mercia. It was inconvenient that Mercia had met an American serviceman in New Zealand during the war and at it's end had migrated to America to marry him. Ivy travelled to the US in 1947 to stay with Mercia and her husband for a time. Later Mercia brought her family back to New Zealand for a visit. Still later Ivy visited the US yet again.

Death

Ivy passed away on the 26th of October 1954 and is interred with her mother in the Roman Catholic section of Hillsborough Cemetery in Auckland.

Leo Marcus (Rex) Sayers



According to those who knew him, Rex Sayers was one of “nature’s gentlemen” – liked and respected by all who knew him.

Born Leo Marcus Sayers, Rex in his early years was primarily cared for by his grandmother. Soon after Rex was born, his father left and was literally “never seen again”. Rex’s mother Ivy, travelled extensively in her theatrical work.

Rex completed “primary school” and two years of “high school” (about average for the time). On leaving he got a job as a clerk. In his spare time he became very involved with amateur Repertory Theatre – an interest and involvement which would continue throughout his life. In this respect he was a lot like his grandfather.

In the later 1920’s it seems that he did some minor professional work in the theatre. The first record of a fully professional engagement is as a member of the cast of the “Gloom Chasers Review Company” (a variety vaudeville show) in September of 1930.

1931 saw the advent of the “Originals” – a vaudeville company organised and produced by Rex himself. In the advertisements it is noted that the pianist is “Miss Ivy Akersten” (Rex’s mother) and a featured performer is “Little Mercia” (Rex’s 8-year-old half-sister). All of the reported performances took place in the Christchurch area so presumably the family was living in the area.

Interestingly, neither the newspaper advertisements not



Figure 7. Little Mercia

the press reviews of the show mentioned the familial relationship. This company met with some success as it continued to appear to good press reviews for almost two years.

In the early 1930’s Rex had lived in the Christchurch area but

by 1935 he had moved to Auckland. In 1936 he got a (part-time) job as a radio announcer with Auckland station 1YA. In 1940 this became a permanent

“ORIGINALS”

BRIGHT SHOW AT SOUTHBRIDGE

A bright and snappy vaudeville entertainment was staged at Southbridge Town Hall on Saturday night by The Originals Revue Co., which contributed a programme of varied numbers, consisting of songs, ballets, comedy numbers and novelty scenas.

Opening with a rousing chorus by the company, introducing musical comedy and talkie hits, of which an outstanding number was “Alice Blue-gown” from “Irene,” by Little Mercia, a clever child performer, who, although only nine years old, is a finished artist in every way. A lightening comedy sketch followed, entitled “Hot News,” a satire on American newspaper life as immortalised by the talkies. Next followed a foxtrot number by Mr Rex Sayers, “Exactly Like You,” in which Mr Sayers was assisted by a ballet of four prettily-frocked girls attired in pastel tinted feather frocks. This number was heartily encored by the audience, and it was evident that the Southbridge people have a distinct flair for dancing. Another outstanding artist was Miss Molly Turnbull, whose sweet soprano voice was heard to advantage in a bracket of songs, “Desert Song,” from the musical play of the same name, and “Little Grey Bonnet,” from “The Quaker Girl,” also in a number with ballet, “Beside the Babbling Brook.” Some clever comedy work for Johnnie Gerald, the diminutive comedian, followed in several quick gags, “Depression,” “Shirt Gag” and “The Duck” which

Probably the gem of the evening was a duo by Little Mercia and Mr Rex Sayers, “In a Little Place called Heaven,” in which they both sang and acted delightfully. The climax, in which little Mercia appeared as the bride, was particularly charming. The dancing acts of Andre and Nanette was well applauded, the dancing in the Argentine Tango being particularly well done. Miss Lee Swanson, who appeared in several dance solos and sketches, proved herself an artist of no mean order and her frocking was a delight to the feminine eye. Mr Norman Foster, the tenor of the party, sang with good effect, “Red Devon by the Sea,” being particularly well done. Other outstanding numbers were: “Harmony Heaven,” by the company, “Dutch Lullaby” and “Tin Pan Parade” by Little Mercia; solo dance, Miss Nell Merrin; concerted numbers, “Moonlight Saving Time,” “Lady of Spain” “Great Big Army of Friends.” The last item contained a clever comedy hornpipe burlesque by Mr Des. O’Flaherty and Mr Johnnie Gerald. The whole presentation was a worthy effort towards banishing the gloom of our “depressionistic” times, and a show of real merit. An early return, with a complete change of programme, is promised.

Figure 6. From the Ellesmere Guardian (Christchurch) 29th March 1932.

appointment.

Possibly through his radio job, Rex met Noel Coward in 1941. They formed a friendship which was maintained through frequent correspondence for the rest of Rex's life.

With WW2 well under way, Rex enlisted in the Army in February 1941. In April he was mobilised as a Signaller (Radio Operator) in the headquarters of the NZ 3rd Division at Bourail in New Caledonia. Later Rex would play his part at Guadalcanal, Vella Lavella in the Solomon Islands and in a number of other battles.



Contrary to much popular belief the life of a soldier is mostly one of waiting! As a percentage very little time is spent in actual conflict. Most of the time soldiers have nothing to do. This creates a major problem both for morale and for discipline. Many large military forces combat this by forming “entertainment” units of various kinds. In the military a “party” is just a group of people brought together to accomplish a defined task (as in “boarding party” or even “burial party”).

Early in WW2, the New Zealand Second Division fighting in the Middle East formed a unit called the “Kiwi Concert Party”. As with many in other services, this was composed of serving soldiers who happened to have talent as entertainers. (If you have in excess of 100,000 men to choose from you are almost certain to find some talented musicians and entertainers.) This unit was very successful. Later, around March 1943, the NZ

Third Division, fighting in the Pacific, set up a similar but much smaller unit also called the “Kiwi Concert Party” but with the suffix “Pacific”. The Pacific unit had an establishment strength of ten⁵ men (including the organiser) where the Middle East unit had in excess of 30. Rex was chosen to be organiser and compare of this unit but of course in such a small unit he did his share of singing and acting too. An “official history” of NZ in WW2 describes events as follows:

“Between the sections and the formations to which they were attached concerts were organised, and rare was the section that could not produce a virtuoso of the mouth organ or a guitar player. Arising from the joint efforts of Captain Hanna and Chaplain G. R. Thompson a concert party of artists from signals and other units in the divisional area was formed. Signaller (later Warrant-Officer 2nd Class) Rex Sayers was appointed producer and, following practices held in a camp tent set aside for that purpose, a non-stop variety show was presented on the evening of the opening of the newly erected men's mess at Moindah. Props, costumes and curtains were adapted from anything which could be borrowed or acquired, and the stage lighting controlled by rheostat was the effort of M section. Female impersonators, magician, comedians, musicians and vocalists received deafening applause as they entertained in turn. General Barrowclough with other divisional officers attended the premiere performance which was the forerunner to others of the 'Pacific Kiwis' at DOW, United States 109th Station Hospital, YMCA, at Bourail, Plaine des Gaiacs and the 4th General Hospital.

Following the success of this party applications were invited for the position of producer for an official concert party for the division. Rex Sayers was the successful applicant, and along with Alan Matthews (Alamat the Magician) of signals and some other members in the divisional show, plus those selected from the remainder of the division, they left their respective units to commence full time concert work. Known as the 'Kiwi Concert Party,' or 'Kiwis in the Pacific,' the troupe continuously toured the units of the division entertaining enthusiastic audiences wherever the curtain (or blankets) went up. Most of the shows were held on stages erected out in the open with a tropical sky for a ceiling.”

⁵ By the end of WW2 this had expanded to 15.

Whereas other nations forces had similar units the "Kiwi" Concert Parties were unique! Most units provided amateurish entertainment with a staple diet of dirty songs and skits lampooning senior officers etc. The Kiwis thought otherwise. They aimed at, and indeed achieved, a fully "professional" standard in everything they did! Gone were the awkward "dirty songs" of other units - replaced with items that would be fully at home on a theatre stage in a hometown capital city. For this they obtained great popularity and fame.

They also worked very hard! In one four-month tour of the forward areas they put on 90 scheduled performances and 20 informal ones to a total audience of 75,000 men!

It was true that members of both the Middle Eastern Kiwi Concert Party and the Pacific unit were supposed to be trained soldiers. Indeed, on one occasion the Middle Eastern unit had to take up arms and fight for their lives. However, this wasn't exactly true in the Pacific. The only military action seen by the Pacific unit⁶ was that at one point they were returning to base on a ship and were asked to escort a Japanese prisoner. They had to go and scrounge up a few rifles and some ammunition.



Figure 8. Rex is the one wearing the hat. Photograph courtesy of the Alexander Turnbull Library.



Figure 9. In Costume for "Minnie of Trinidad". Rex is leftmost in the photograph. Photograph courtesy of the Alexander Turnbull Library.

Then one of their number (the 18-year-old female impersonator, Ralph Dyer) had to ask an officer how to remove the bolt from a rifle for cleaning! On enlistment, Ralph had been deployed to the Concert Party without going through basic training!

The New Zealanders fought hard and valiantly in the Pacific but the Americans had vast manpower and equipment. The Americans also felt that they wanted to deal with Japan alone! What they needed was food! As a percentage of population New Zealand had committed more than perhaps any other country to the war and there weren't sufficient people to produce the needed food. Thus in mid-1944 New Zealand recalled the 3rd Division to release men to work throughout the economy but primarily on the farms. This wasn't a

⁶ Of course most members had already seen action before the Concert Party was formed.

major withdrawal; the (much larger) NZ Second Division continued fighting in the Middle East and Europe. It did however mean the end, after only about a year, of the “Kiwi Concert Party in the Pacific”. For several years afterwards, both “Kiwi Concert Parties” appeared in commercial concerts in major NZ cities. The “Pacific Kiwis” did give a few performances by themselves, but most performances included members of BOTH the Pacific and Middle Eastern units. Rex appeared in several of these.

After the War

After his demobilisation in November 1944, Rex went back to 1YA for a short time and then moved to the South Island to become “Announcer in Charge” of Dunedin Radio. In 1951 he returned to 1YA as “Senior Announcer”. In this role he often provided the radio commentary for important public events.

In 1960 he moved to Television as an Announcer and Continuity Reader. Almost immediately he was appointed Host of the first TV quiz show in NZ called “One to Win”. Unfortunately this program only lasted for one year.

Rex was also a founding member of a band of broadcasters who produced and acted in many productions that raised money for various charities.

Rex formally retired in 1968 but it seems retirement didn’t mean slowing down. He became deeply involved in the “North Shore Operatic Society” which, although an amateur association, produced high quality, mainstream musicals. A partial list of Rex’s acting involvement is as follows: 1969 – “Kiss Me Kate”, 1965 – “South Pacific”, 1972 – “The King and I”, 1974 – “Hello Dolly”, 1975 – “West Side Story”. It is illustrative to note that the composers of these musicals held copyright. They would NOT allow any production to go forward unless they were satisfied that it would be of fully professional standard!

In 1970 he toured the USA with the “National Band of New Zealand” as “Compare/Commentator”. This was an amateur Brass Band of very high standard. The tour was noted in the press as long and exhausting but its musical excellence was unchallenged. Rex also had the opportunity of seeing his sister (Mercia) and her family again.

Around 1976 he had an operation for bowel cancer and later was diagnosed as having a brain tumour. During his final illnesses Rex moved into the home of a colleague from the New Zealand Broadcasting Authority. Dawn Cornwall (now Dawn Walton) cared for him during these difficult years.

Family

While Rex never married he kept in frequent contact with his sister (Mercia) and her family in the US. His niece remembers him as being very generous and concerned with their lives. He seems to have had less contact with his mother but was devoted to his grandmother.

Religion

In common with his whole family, Rex had been raised in the Roman Catholic faith. As late as 1944 he is mentioned as being active in the “Catholic Club”. However, he abandoned his faith and indeed became strongly opposed to it. This caused some tension between him and both his mother and his sister. In his final days he insisted that no Roman Catholic clergy were to be allowed to visit him nor were they to be allowed to officiate at his funeral!

Rex passed away on the 12th of July 1978 and is interred in the Waikumete Cemetery (Auckland).

Mercia Miner (nee Jacobs)

Mercia Catherine Jacobs, daughter of Albert and Ivy was born on 29th April 1922 in Auckland New Zealand. Little is known about Albert as he disappeared soon after she was born and she never knew him. At this time her mother, Ivy, was not travelling as much as she had previously and Mercia spent her early years in Auckland. In 1927 the family moved to Christchurch and would remain there until 1934.

Mercia became something of a child prodigy as a performer. At the age of eight she performed as “little Mercia” a very successful vaudeville show produced by her brother (Rex Sayers)⁷. This show, in which her mother was the pianist, ran for nearly two years! After the family moved back to Auckland, Mercia continued at school and later learned shorthand and typing. However, throughout the 1930’s she is reported as performing occasionally in vaudeville productions as a singer.

World War Two arrived and New Zealand had the same problem as England. American servicemen arrived on leave and they were “over paid, over sexed and over here”! Mercia seemed not to mind as she met a young American serviceman, **Eugene Calvert Miner**, at a party and romance blossomed. Eugene had been a pharmacist in civilian life and was therefore employed in the Medical Corps in the US Army. Unfortunately for them he was posted back to the US soon afterwards and the relationship continued by mail.

Margaret Mitchell (Mercia’s daughter) writes: *“After meeting my father at a party in New Zealand, she became engaged by mail. She wasn’t able to cross the ocean to meet him again, so she bought her own engagement ring in Auckland, which I wear every day and have for many years. She wrote to Dad for two years, and her letters were read by someone, who crossed out certain words, censoring what may have been not allowed during the war. When the last letter was written, the person who had read so many love letters from her American Army fiancé, congratulated her on her upcoming marriage, and wished her luck!”*



Crossing the Pacific in February of 1945 was not without risk! The Japanese were “on the run” but by no means defeated and occasional Japanese warships and submarines roamed around attacking any allied merchant vessel they encountered. But “love conquers all” and Mercia arrived in California on the 3rd of March 1945. There was no time to waste and the couple were married on 2nd of April. The couple moved to Steubenville Ohio where they were destined to spend most of their lives.

In due course, three children (Margaret, Leo and Eugene) arrived and Mercia settled into the role of housewife and mother.

⁷ See the photograph and the newspaper clipping under “Rex Sayers” earlier in this document.

Mercia had both considerable musical talent and a great love of music. In the US she studied singing formally probably for the first time. In Steubenville she sang in the St. Pius X Church choir (Roman Catholic) but often performed solo in protestant churches. In later years she would become Choir Director. In addition, she sang in a community chorus and occasionally performed in various “shows”. In 1970 the children had grown and she found that she had some time. She got a job as a secretary at the “Jefferson County Technical School” – a role which she came to love. Sadly, in April of 1972 Eugene passed away. In 1982 Mercia retired from work and briefly moved to California where she took the opportunity to perform in a Melodrama (at the age of 60).

Baked Barbecued Beef Recipe



THIS WAS one of the first 'American' dishes I enjoyed in 1949 after arriving in the United States from New Zealand. It's now the most-used recipe in my recipe box! It's easy to prepare and so well liked. I've willingly shared it with my grandchildren and friends. -Mercia Miner, Canfield, Ohio

She then moved to Canfield, Ohio, where she sang in the St. Michael Choir, several opera choruses as well as the Youngstown Symphony Chorus. As an enthusiastic member of the St. Michael Church, she was a member of its Altar Guild and worked in the sacristy of the church. In addition she was a volunteer with Meals on Wheels in Youngstown, a member of the Civic Choral Society and the Garden Club in Steubenville. Mercia was an avid gardener. She seemed also to rather like cooking as may be deduced from the excerpt (above) from a cookbook published on the Internet.



Mercia passed away on June the 26th 2007 at the age of 85.

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To Readers:

This document represents the state of knowledge of the author as at September 2011. There are obvious major gaps and there may be inaccuracies. Should anyone have any material at all that would add to our knowledge or correct errors it would be appreciated if they would contact the author at harry.dutton@bigpond.com . Thank you.