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## *Levuka & School Days*

The highest point in the volcanic mountain range behind Levuka is known as The Peak. When Eileen was about twelve she climbed to The Peak for the first time with a group of three girls and two boys. They were all barefoot and it was a tough climb. Bashing their way through thick vegetation that scatched their arms and legs, they pulled themselves up the volcanic rocks. From the Peak they had a breathtaking view of the town far below and the wide blue ocean and islands beyond.

Eileen looked out to sea to the islands of the Lomaiviti Group. One of the islands, Makogai, was a leper colony. The Fiji Government purchased the island in 1908 as an isolated base for people suffering from the dreaded skin disease. Patients were cared for by the Missionary Sisters of the Society of Mary; schooling was offered to children and two churches were built.

It was an arduous trek to The Peak. For a view of the town Eileen normally climbed the 199 Steps up Mission Hill. From the top of the steps she could look out over Levuka with its coconut palms, winding creeks, green fields of Nasau Park, and warehouses at the port end of town.

Wealthier families tended to live in the colonial houses on Mission Hill. Pathways led from the sturdy concrete steps, built by early German residents, to the houses, many of which had their own tennis courts.

The Levuka of Eileen's childhood was a small, intimate town of a few thousand people. It was a melting pot of Fijian, European, Indian, Chinese and Pacific Island cultures drawn to the port town for work, education or other reasons. Located at the foot of the mountains, the main town is confined to a narrow area of flat land next to the sea.

Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, who was good friends with Bunny A'Costa, lived in Levuka as a child. He wrote about the town in his memoirs:

. . . I remember Levuka as a very cheerful town. There were lots of dances, and as one walked about, nearly every house seemed to have a piano, and someone or a group would be singing. I was fortunate later on to spend two years in Levuka and could certainly echo the words of a favourite Fijian song:

*I always remember Levuka;  
And the happy times we all spent there  
Keep rising before my eyes in dreams*

It's that sort of place. Even now, when two people with a Levuka connection meet, all their talk will be of the old capital.<sup>12</sup>

Levuka was founded in about 1820 by European settlers and traders. The port was once a popular stop for sailing ships, sandalwood traders and whalers. Sailing ships used the easterly trade winds that blew for most of the year to negotiate a passage through the wide offshore reef that protects the harbour.



*Levuka from the north end between 1888 and 1892. The large building jutting out from the coast is the Mechanics Institute. Directly behind the institute is Niukaubi Hill, once the site of the Cakobau Government's Supreme Court and temporary Parliament House, and now a war memorial.* National Library Wellington.

In the 1860s Levuka grew rapidly with the cotton trade. The American Civil War had disrupted supplies of cotton and it was found that cotton could be grown in Fiji. Most of the cotton grown in the plantations was shipped from Levuka and the town leapt to prominence. Labour was needed for plantations located on outlying islands and as far away as Queensland, Australia, and men known as 'blackbirders' bought or took people – many from the Solomon Islands and New Hebrides (Vanuatu) – by deception or force. Levuka became a centre of the notorious blackbird trade. Many of these indentured labourers were treated like slaves on the

plantations and never returned to their islands. There are villages on Ovalau Island populated by descendants of labourers from the Solomons.<sup>13</sup>

During the 1860s to 70s the town had a wild reputation due to the plantation owners, runaways and convicts that stopped at the port. The town had more than 50 bars and grog shops.

When Fiji became a British colony in 1874, Levuka was named the capital. The arrival of the British colonial administration had a calming influence on the town. Many small government buildings were built, plus Fiji's first hotel, the Royal Hotel. The road around Ovalau and the old seawall were built by the British. In 1881 the government decided to move the capital to Suva. This was prompted by concerns that the high mountains surrounding Levuka prevented the town from expanding. The advent of steam also allowed ships to negotiate the narrow gap in the coral reef to enter the Port of Suva.<sup>14</sup>

After losing the status of capital, Levuka began to gradually lose businesses and people, although it remained a hub for the copra trade until the 1950s.

From her view point on Mission Hill, Eileen could see the square stone clock tower of the Sacred Heart Catholic Church, standing out from the trees and houses below. Her family worshipped there. Eileen heard the echo of the church's French clock gonging on the hour.

The A'Costa family all went to confession on Saturday afternoons and Mass on Sunday mornings. Eileen recalled that before taking communion they weren't allowed to eat breakfast. Children often grew light-headed and fainted while waiting in line. During Lent, children were expected to attend 6 o'clock Mass



*View of Levuka from Mission Hill in the 1920s.*

National Library of New Zealand; Mary Purdon photo album.

every day. To save time in the mornings, Eileen and Anita wore their petticoats and socks to bed. “When we got up in the morning we just had to pull our dresses over our heads and slip on our shoes before we went to church,” said Eileen. “At school the nuns would ask all those who had been to Mass that morning to stand up. Everyone who remained seated would get a rap over their knuckles with a ruler.”

Opposite the church stood the dazzling white buildings of the Sacred Heart Convent School, the first school that Eileen attended. The following is a report from a Marist sister on Catholic life in Levuka in the 1920s.

Levuka of the 1920s was a very busy town with many overseas ships calling and most of the people European. There was great difficulty in getting pupils from the town area to come to school.

Most of the Catholics were poor and could not afford the school fees which were one shilling a week for Europeans and part-Europeans and sixpence for Fijians and Indians.

The boarders – part Europeans, come from Vanua Levu, Rotuma, Suva and Lautoka. Many of the pupils were baptised at school and have now made good parents. The Catholics of Levuka were very staunch and through their good example and the devotedness of the Priests and Catechists they had a lasting influence on the people of the town.<sup>15</sup>

Eileen recalled that the sisters at the Convent were very strict. The children were forbidden from entering churches of other denominations. But sometimes when a wedding was held at the Methodist Church the children couldn't resist sneaking in to get a glimpse of the bride. On Monday mornings a nun would ask all the children who had been into the Methodist Church to raise their hands. Those children were then sent outside to have their hands smacked with a ruler.

When Eileen was about ten years old she caught typhoid fever and was away from school for some months. It was the unhappiest period in her childhood. She spent six weeks in Levuka Hospital and only her mother was allowed to visit. The Fijian nurses were very caring and she shared a room with two sisters of a similar age. The young patients all had their heads shaved. Morning and night they were given a dose of foul-tasting orange medicine and soup was their only sustenance. When Eileen finally came home she must have looked a fright. Little sisters Norma and Jean saw her standing in the doorway, gaunt and with her hair like a prickly sea urchin. They burst into tears.



*Sacred Heart Catholic Church,  
built in 1858.*



*Sacred Heart Convent School (now Marist Convent School).*