

Good old times in St Bathans

Noel Kennedy records the memories of an early St Bathans resident.



Mrs Beatrice McLeod, 95 years of age, who spent her childhood years in St Bathans.

AT 95 years of age, Mrs Beatrice McLeod enjoys talking about her childhood days in St Bathans in Central Otago.

Mrs McLeod has some difficulty with her sight, but for her age, she is extremely active and the words come tumbling out as she recalls people and places.

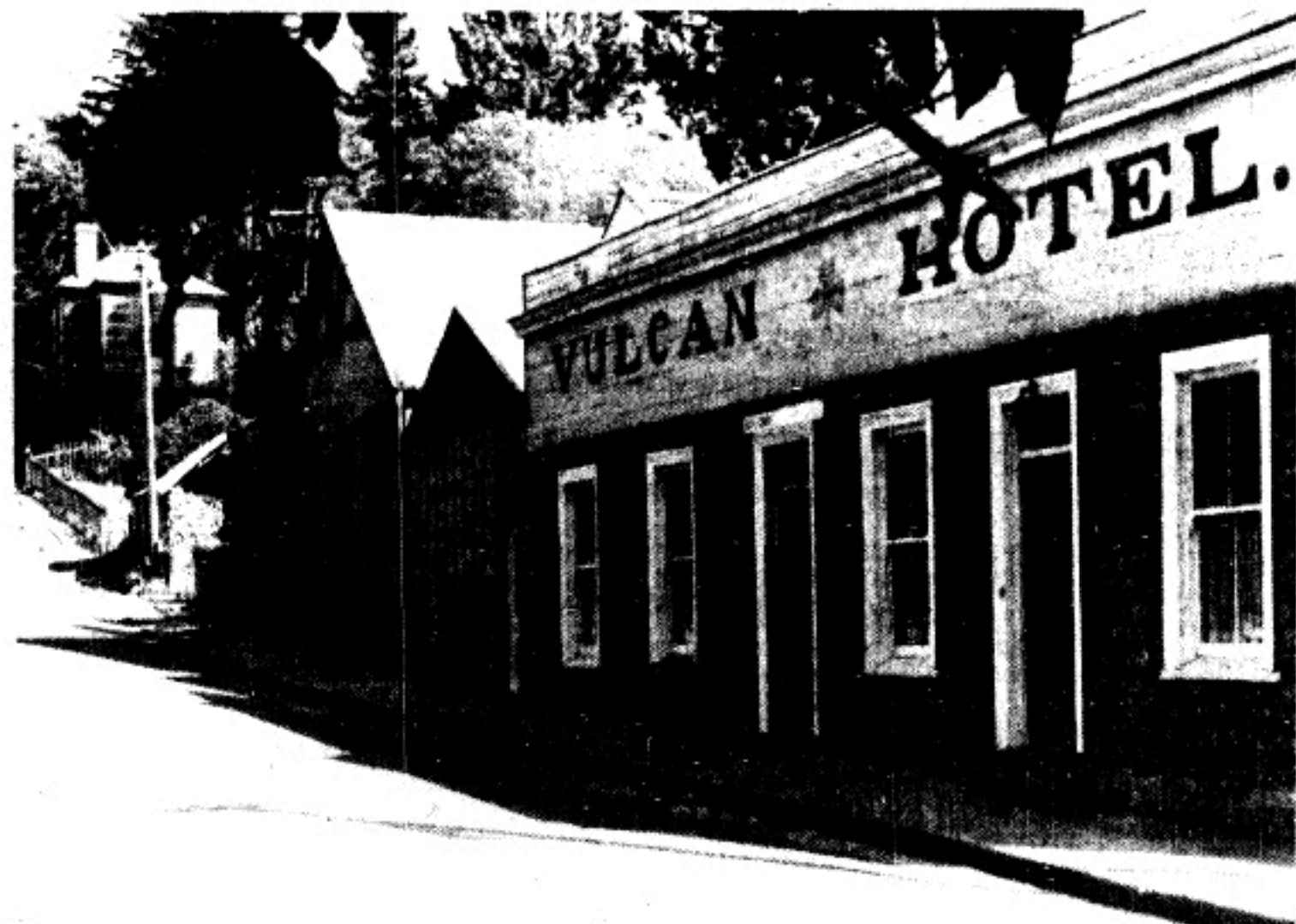
Mrs McLeod was born on July 14, 1887 in the Police Station at St Bathans and the birth was attended by Mrs McPherson, the local mid-wife. Her father, Constable James Kennedy and her mother, Mary, had transferred there from the Oamaru station in May of the same year. By then, St Bathans had passed the peak of its fame as a mining town and in doing so had embarked upon quieter times. No longer was it necessary to maintain three policemen in the town to attempt to exert some control over drunken miners and larrikins who terrorised anyone who fell foul of them.

Mrs McLeod remembers none of that.

"I remember Dr Stenhouse, but I'm not sure if he was our first doctor.

Everybody liked him but we didn't see him much as patients. We were a healthy lot and people treated themselves. If there was an epidemic, people would burn sulphur on a fire shovel and carry it through the house. They did that at school too. The fumes were supposed to cleanse the air. And then there was treacle and sulphur mixed up on a spoon. A dose of that was supposed to cure anything," she said with a reminiscent grimace.

"There were nine of us children and our house had three bedrooms and a parlour and a big kitchen that was almost the width of the house. We had a coal range that we cooked on and also warmed the room in winter. Many people still had an open fire with bars across it for the pots to stand on. We had to get our water from the pump outside. It would freeze in winter so we had to leave a big pot of water on the range overnight to start us off in the morning. And then we got this wonderful Orion range with a tank and a brass tap on



Modern St Bathans — the Vulcan Hotel still stands.

the side of it and we could get hot water without having to boil a kettle. But I can remember my mother pumping water outside for many years.

"We had a small dairy and the milk was set out in shallow trays so that my mother could skim the cream off to make butter. The girls' job was to turn the handle of the butter churn."

Cold days

Mrs McLeod has vivid memories of the cold winters and heavy snow falls.

"I remember my father and brothers clearing paths through the snow to the sheds and stable at the back of the house. Sometimes it would be five feet deep and everyone would be out digging. I can't remember being cold. We wore woollen clothing and lace up boots. The girls had felt snow boots which were put on over the top of our ordinary boots.

"And then there was the skating and curling. Everyone had skates and the best ones came from Briscoes in Dunedin. There would be the Bon Speil and at the end of that there was a big meal of beef and greens. But the winter seemed to go on for months with deep snow and heavy frost. To keep warm in bed we would warm a brick in the oven and that would be put into bed just before bedtime. There were no hot water bottles that I can remember."

School in winter seems to have been a rather spasmodic occurrence due to the heavy snowfalls.

"There were two teachers, Mr Cowan who taught the standard classes and a lady teacher who taught the infants. I forget her name but she married Mr Cowan. There was an iron stove for heating and that seemed to keep us warm enough. Mr Cowan was a very strict teacher but we were more scared of Inspector Pride who came from Dunedin each year for our exams. He decided whether you passed on to the next standard or not. Exam day was the worst day of the year," she said.

The school concert was always well attended as were those concerts put on by other groups in the hall next to the present Vulcan Hotel. There would be lots of singing, recitations and sketches. Mrs McLeod remembers the itinerant entertainers who visited St Bathans. One group, the Black family, toured with their gear on tandem bicycles.

But best remembered were the evenings at home when the kitchen furniture was pulled back and the piano brought into the room and there would be singing and dancing with friends or just the family.

"Yes, we had some lovely times," and she smiled reflectively. "we girls did look forward to the dances."

The Masonic Ball was one of the highlights of the year and the St Patrick's Night dance was another. There were various club dances and socials and at all of them the Morgan family was prominent in providing the music.

Social town

It was a tightly knit community with none of the sectarian disunity of previous years. The population was predominantly of Irish descent and consequently, the St Patrick's Day celebrations were one of the

social events of the year. There was a picnic and a rugby match with neighbouring Cambrian and of course the pubs were open. And if there was the occasional bout of fistcuffs when the pubs closed, it was soon forgotten. The return fixture with Cambrian was played on St David's Day in honour of the many Welsh miners who had settled there.

Mrs McLeod remembers St Bathans as a law abiding community. The lockup behind the police house was occupied by the occasional drunk but, even though the court sat once a month, there was little serious crime. She does, however, remember her father being called to a domestic disturbance where the husband had arrived home drunk and was promptly "crowned" with the contents of a stew pot by his irate wife.

In Mrs McLeod's day, the town was fast approaching its present shape with houses and shops on the uphill side of the road. Mining operations had steadily eaten into the downhill side until they were eventually stopped by the road itself.

Although it was a period of winding down, the town was a busy little place. There were those who were engaged in mining and those who served them and the surrounding district in various ways. There were also those who for reasons of health or age had given up mining and eked out a precarious existence in their tiny cottages.

One of these was Mr Toomey, the carter. His hands swathed in kerosene soaked bandages as a home cure for the rheumatism which affected so many ex-miners, he was the odd job man who carted the coal and the chaff and so on. One day the inevitable happened. A carelessly lit pipe, and Toomey's rheumatism was

nearly cured for all time.

Much of the business life centred on the two stores, McConnachy's and Pyle's, and both storekeepers took an active part in community life.

"Frank Pyle was a keen amateur photographer and he and his brothers played in the band. Mary Renwick taught music and her father had the butcher shop. There were three dressmakers at one time. We had a pastry cook, I think it was Mr Scherp. And a bootmaker and a blacksmith. Frank McGregor drove the coach we had to take to Middlemarch and then catch a train there if we wanted to go to Dunedin.

"There were two hotels, the Vulcan and the Ballarat, but there used to be more than that. The Post Office was a small building and then they built the one that is there now but that was after my time." She paused. "It was a good community. There was very little money about and a penny to spend was a fortune."

As in most small towns, teenagers had difficulty in finding employment and eventually Mrs McLeod had to make the rough jolting trip with Frank McGregor to Middlemarch on her way to take up employment and the start of a new life. But St Bathans is still dearly remembered. The police house now belongs to the rabbit board and the lock-up and stable have disappeared. The school and the Post Office closed long ago. Only the echo in the empty hall next to the Vulcan Hotel serves as a reminder of times that are past.

Mrs McLeod, who resides in St Barnabas Home, St Clair, has one surviving brother. She enjoys listening to the radio and taking her daily walk. And her comment on being 95 years of age?

"I had a happy childhood. I have a lot to be thankful for."



The St Bathans Post Office in the 1900s. The driver of the Royal Mail coach is Frank McGregor (photograph Frank Pyle).