

CENTRAL HAWKES BAY NEWS

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Fragile reminder of deadly quake

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ALTHOUGH many survivors' tales from the Hawke's Bay earthquake of 1931 have been recorded there are still people around with a story to share.

Now living in Waipukurau, Janet Nairn was just 8 at the time. Her family lived at Whenuahou Station in Omakere, but had rented a house in Havelock North to be closer to her brothers who attended Hereworth School.

Mrs Nairn was set to attend Queenswood School, and the family were living at their Busby Hill house when one day she developed a toothache.

"My mother dropped me off at the dentist, I had never been to one before as they didn't have dental clinics in those days, and I was sitting in the chair when I thought there was a thunderstorm.

"There was a loud rumbling noise, and I looked across at the post office where there were bricks falling. It was very noisy, and someone was lying on the ground.

"I thought to myself 'I do not think I like this' and then the tray with the dental tools fell



MEMENTO: Janet Nairn holding a cup and saucer that was only slightly cracked after being buried under bricks from a chimney that collapsed in the 1931 earthquake.

PHOTO/NICKI HARPER

over. I sat there uncertain what to do as I had been told to stay sitting."

At the time there was another young girl in the surgery who, with Mrs Nairn, had been left there while the dentist and his

assistant escaped the building.

Her mother in the meantime had gone to buy a school uniform, but fortunately did not make it into the building where people ended up being trapped and killed.

"She came and got me out and made me sit in the gutter, and then went back in and got the other girl out — my mother got a huge chunk of glass in her leg. We then started back towards Havelock North.

"On the way she told me not to look but of I course I did and I remember seeing a dead Chinaman."

Back at the house, the chimneys had collapsed. Mrs Nairn's father, who had been at the farm in Omakere, drove to Havelock North, having to construct his own bridge with a couple of planks of wood where an existing bridge had collapsed.

"When he got there, in between the shaking, he went into the house and got some blankets and some food and made a cup of tea.

"There was another jolt and the teapot flew out of his hand and he said 'bloody hell' — which was shocking as he never swore."

The family slept on the tennis court for three or four nights as their father was not keen to take them over the broken bridge again.

After that Mrs Nairn went to stay with her grandparents in Masterton, returning to Omakere after a couple of months when everything had been cleaned up.

She still retains a memento of the event — a small blue cup and saucer that miraculously came through unscathed apart from falling down from the second storey, through the house, along with the bricks from the chimney.