

Harriet Emma Bowen: a thought provoking woman

Harriet Emma Bowen was born in New Plymouth, Taranaki in Jul 1872.

Her parents were James Robert & Mary Ann (nee Cook). They had 9 children, two of whom died very young. James fought as a Captain in the NZ Wars in Taranaki. He originally came from Middlesex, England. Mary Ann came to NZ as a 10 year old, from London, England.

Unfortunately James died at a very early age (either 33 or 37), leaving Mary Ann to bring up all the children and to run a grocery business.

She eventually moved the family to Levin in 1893 and opened a general store in Queen St, which included the Post Office.

This is where Harriet started her career. She assisted her mother until eventually being appointed Postmistress.

When the new Post Office was built (on the eastern corner of Oxford S & Queen St) she continued as Postmistress, despite some concerns (from some local citizens) about a woman being appointed to such a position.

In 1909 she was transferred to the new Aramoho office (Wanganui). Three years later she transferred back to the Post Office at Weraroa.

Before moving to Aramoho she was presented with an illuminated address.

An extract reads:

"We have admired the tact and business administration you have displayed in coping with the heavy increase in postal business in Levin in recent times. We also desire to sincerely thank you for you many acts of kindness to those who sought your advice and help, and for the great interest you have always taken in any movement to advance the district."

In her obituary it stated that these sentiments were expressed in 1909 and throughout the following 50 years.

Red Cross was a particular outlet for her boundless energy. In 1957 she received the Societies 30 year jewel. Much of her time was spent visiting and cheering up the sick & invalid members of the community.

She had a wide range of interests including the YMCA, Dr Barnardo's homes, Anglican Sundays schools, as organist in the Weraroa church, a life member of the Levin Horticultural Soc, Weraroa Reserve Ground committee and on the School committee of Levin District High School for several years.

In 1927 she decided to retire from her role of Postmistress, due to health reasons. (Fortunately an operation restored much of her health.) A special social function was held to recognise her work, especially in social, fundraising and other organising efforts outside of her official duties.

Taking on life to the fullest after retiring, Harriet was elected to Levin Borough Council as the first woman Councillor, in 1935 and served over 12 years till 1947. She acted as Mayoress during the term of Mr H A Phillips as he was unmarried.

She hosted many garden parties, fetes and other social events at her home in Queen St East called Karaka Lodge. (The house is still there today in Karaka Rd – and it is a lovely building.) By all accounts the grounds were very beautiful, which goes with her long & strong involvement in horticultural & flower show activities.

Harriet once described herself as follows: *I am not a labourite, a capitalist or any other-ist, but simply, I trust, a woman of independent thought & commonsense views, offering to do her utmost for the town.*

Harriet never married, however with 6 siblings she had many nieces & nephews and enjoyed their companionship.

She died in Aug 1959, aged 87 and is buried at Tiro Tiro Rd cemetery.

As a woman of independent thought it is believed that Harriet probably signed the suffrage petition. However the Levin one is lost so it cannot be proven either way.