

Memories of Port Elizabeth by Beulah Gross

My late mother, Ida Baetz nee Ausbruch, was born in February 1912. When she and I were writing her family history, she described Port Elizabeth as she remembered it from when she was aged seven onwards.

The streets of Port Elizabeth were alive with activity. Carts filled with farm produce pulled by Clydesdale or Shire horses were much in evidence and the cries of the peddlers filled the air. Each peddler had his or her own call so that housewives and children would know who was coming down the street.

Coloured (mulatto) fish-sellers walked up and down carrying freshly-caught fish in panniers hanging front and back from poles across their shoulders. Other peddlers had handmade feather dusters and baskets of all shapes and sizes. Two or three-tiered baskets on legs for baby goods such as napkins, bibs, soap and so on were much in demand by prospective mothers and grandmothers who would pad and line them in dainty materials, frills and bows.

One of the highlights of her early life was the annual visit to Port Elizabeth by Boswell's and Pagel's Travelling Circuses. They arrived in caravans pulling the wild cat cages in huge, barred cages on wheels. The circus performers marched through the main streets dressed in full regalia, entertaining the crowds lining the streets with loud music, drums and cymbals, jugglers, acrobats, tumblers and clowns. As the parade passed through the town, all business ceased as shop owners and customers cheered and applauded wildly.

The circus made their camp and pitched their Big Top marquee, which was tremendous, in the empty green, called The Skiet, in the centre of North End in Adderley Street.

All the local children came to watch the circus settling in and tried to help. Although they were never allowed to, they never gave up hoping.

The circus stayed just a few days before moving on and all performances were always fully sold out. For days after the circus had gone, the children discussed the acts avidly and tried to emulate what they had seen. They also searched the fields for coins which might have been dropped by members of the audience and according to Mom, quite often found a fair number.

During the 1914-1918 war when Mom was about seven, a German-Jewish friend of her father, came to visit. Mom began to sing a song popular at the time: 'Hang the German Kaiser from the sour apple tree,' sung to the tune of 'John Brown's Body'. This infuriated the man who lifted Mom up by the armpits and held her against the wall, saying: 'I'll hang YOU on the sour apple tree.' Mom says his eyes seemed to be blazing; it was her first taste of fear.

In 1918, when the war ended, she and her sister walked with their parents into town on the night that the German flag was to be burned. It was a night of rejoicing for everyone and Mom and Isabel wore Union

Jacks as scarves over their heads. They did not go up the hill to the Donkin Reserve where the ceremony was to take place; instead, they remained in the main street, singing and dancing with many other people. An addendum to the flag-burning was obtained from the microfiche records of the *Eastern Province Herald*:

‘On the 11th November, 1918, the news of the end of the war came through the wires from Cape Town just about 2 pm where it had been received by Reuters at 1.55 pm. Captain Clift, the Port Captain fired the Signal Rocket and everyone headed for the Eastern Province Herald office in Main Street. They gathered on the Market Square where the City Councillors were crowded onto the balcony. There was much singing, the band of the Prince Alfred Guard played on the balcony of Cleghorns (a large department store) building which overlooked the Market Square and the Salvation Army band played at the foot of the obelisk which still stood there.

‘The following evening – the 12th November, 1918 - a torchlight procession of Boy Scouts, United Municipal services, Girl Guides etc, marched from Market Square to the Donkin Reserve where a large bonfire had been built. Someone who had had a German visitor some years before the war, produced a German flag which was put on the bonfire. The fire was lit by the Mayoress, Mrs Forbes. Mr and Mrs Forbes had lost two sons in the war and their third son was listed as missing.

‘From the 2nd to the 5th August, 1919 general celebrations were organised in Port Elizabeth. There was a two-mile procession involving 58 groups in the centre of which was the ‘Peace Car’. A wreath was laid at the foot of Queen Victoria’s statue in Main Street and a lot of sport and entertainment was held at the Showgrounds which were not far from Market Street.’

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