

## **John William Bell –**

Born 20<sup>th</sup> July 1942 in Dannevirke

The family lived in Dannevirke for around 9 years. My Father was the local Policeman and on one occasion, I went with him to a house that had been on fire. It was a big adventure for me, especially as the water was still falling and I had to stand in a doorway to keep dry. Another occasion I recall from that time, was when some clothes on a hanger above the stove in the kitchen caught fire.

From Dannevirke we went to Palmerston North and stayed there for approximately 2 years, staying with my Aunt Evelyn who owned the home. She was a retired teacher and I learnt a lot from her in that time. Both my brother Roger and I had our bedroom at the front of the house in Cuba Street, not far from the railway and we often heard the steam trains as they went through. When we lay in bed at night, we would watch the car lights going around the room as they went past.

At the beginning of the 50s, Dad was transferred to Wellington and we lived in Wadestown. I was in Standard 1 at that point and was promoted to Standard 3. While there, my Dad had an office underneath the house and somehow my school friends got knowledge of this and arrived at our place looking for the 'bad' people. Wadestown was where my first real interest in movies came to light. I used comics and linked them with a second copy of the same and stuck them together to make an ongoing make-believe movie, which some of my friend came around to watch.

In 1953, once again, Dad was transferred, this time to Tasman Street where we lived in two different houses that were close to each other. There was an old school close by with a big playground which we had full access to for all sorts of fun. This came to a sudden stop when the big old school building caught on fire and was destroyed. The yard behind it became a huge storage for beer bottles. While we were still living there, I was going to the High School which was straight across the road from where we lived.

From Tasman Street we went to Island Bay – the reason being that Mum inherited my Great Uncles home in 1953 and because of that, I had a motorised pushbike to get to school.

My working years began at the end of 1955 when I started as an apprentice with the printing industry, working in the area of film. After I completed my 5 plus years of my apprenticeship, I became a friend of the owner of a coffee bar in Oriental Bay. During that time, he offered ownership of another coffee bar that had become available in upper Cuba Street. I owned it from 1962-1965. While there I used to go across the road to a second-hand shop and became a friend of the owner. By this stage, I owned a small truck and when the owner of the second-hand shop saw it, he asked me if I would like to do a quick delivery for him which I was keen to do and so my adventures into the second-hand business began. I immediately became very keen on a change of occupation and so sold the coffee bar.

I hadn't been there long before a film projector and some films arrived in the shop for sale. I was quick to acquire it and so my film life began in earnest. My second-hand life continued and grew. The owner of the business had his cousin join as well and 10 years later, he and I became partners and owned a new second-hand business between us. This also grew with extra outlets over the next 10 years towards the end of the 90s, when Mario retired. During those 10 years, I met some of the most important film people in the business and so my enjoyment and film interests continued to grow. At the same time, the theatre in our backyard grew to a 40 seater, with a lot of film coming in both through my buying and by people giving it to me. Word got around that we were showing films and requests for screenings started to come in.

As we progressed, we started doing regular monthly programmes, not only in the theatre but also in outside venues, with group bookings during the day as well as in the evenings increasing. The theatre was used by film makers, both for making films and editing them and we got to know many of the people who worked at the National Film Unit until it moved out to Avalon in Lower Hutt. At one point Peter Jackson was able to use the theatre to screen his daily takes, until his own theatre was built at Park Road Post.

As the years rolled by, we found that to some degree we were beginning to tire, but kept our joy with the films we screened and the people who came on a regular basis. This plus the fact that we could do birthday parties from the youngest to the oldest and screenings for various events.

One day, we received a phone call from a real estate agent to say they were in our area and would we like someone to come and give us a quote. Why not, we thought, so we did. The thought gained strength and the outcome was a very keen and eager person, who had come to an earlier screening and had always wanted his own cinema, took it over. We had reached the point that retirement was a good thing and everything worked out well. The desire to show films never decreased and hopefully the new theatre where we are now will continue in the days to come.

Looking back now over the years, the time has been amazing and the joy of meeting people and being able to bring joy into their lives made it all worthwhile.