

MURCHISON EARTHQUAKE STORIES

First-hand accounts of the 1929 Murchison Earthquake

These accounts are taken from interviews conducted in 1983 and 1984 as part of the Richmond Oral History Project. The magnitude 7.8 earthquake occurred at 10.17am on the 17th of June 1929

Roderick O'Connor

"I remember I was at college when the Murchison earthquake occurred. I was lucky – I was only about 12 feet away from a spot where the masonry fell and caught two boys. I was nearly killed. There was a great big assembly hall which was mainly plaster, and we were three rooms along. By the time everyone had scooted, it was like snow – the plaster was coming down like snow. I was sitting in the corner and I was one of the last ones out. And there I was about 12 feet away and down smashed this masonry and caught this fellow who was coming from the corridor in the opposite direction. He was coming out the main entrance. It was a frightening experience - I tell you that".

Mrs Canton

"In 1929 I was 22, and at the time of the Murchison earthquake I was nursing up at Hillcrest in Richmond. I remember I was upstairs in that big building, Hillcrest, and we could see the cows in the paddocks rushing around madly and the whole building was swaying and the patients were terrified. We had to move them all downstairs and some of them had just had big operations and the stairs were very narrow – it was a job to get them down. And of course the building went on shaking for weeks' after that".

Notes: Hillcrest was a maternity care and private hospital at the junction of Waverley and Wensley Roads, Richmond.

Pearl Satherley

"I was in Appleby at the time of the Murchison earthquake. I had to jump out of a two-storeyed window at home. Mum had sticks holding up her chrysanthemums, and luckily when I landed, it was just the other side of these. There was a deer's head, and it was downstairs, above the piano. Evidently it must have come over the top of the piano and landed on the floor.

My friend who was upstairs with me at the time, went to go downstairs. She got down, but there was a brick chimney and the bricks were coming off the chimney and she said it was an awful sensation coming down the stairs, and she'd go to put her foot on the stair and it would move. When she got outside the bricks were coming down. It was an older house – v-shaped; and it was above the stairs that these bricks were coming down and landing on the concrete at the back door. One

brick landed just in front of her, and another just behind. My mother was waiting outside, and she said to me 'Don't jump!' and I did jump, but fortunately I didn't get any bad results from it. But really, there was very little in way of serious damage to the house. It was more just objects thrown about".

Marion Stratford

"I was at college when the earthquake happened. In those days if my mother wanted anything in the town she would give me a note and the money to go downtown to do her message and I could buy my lunch – and the day of the earthquake I was not allowed out of the College grounds. I had had my note signed by the Principal and then the earthquake came and it was announced that all those who had notes signed, had to go to her first. So we did this and I was the only one who was to buy my lunch, so I was taken in and given lunch with the boarders.

We weren't evacuated from the school but the tower on the Boy's College fell and I saw that fall from our school window. I can remember Miss Isaac was taking us for home science and she told us all to stand in doorways. We were not allowed to panic. But the part that upset me so much was going down to the station and seeing all the refugees coming out of Murchison on the train. That was a few days later. I don't think we missed any school days".

Notes: Marion attended Nelson College for Girls.

Max Wilkes

"After Nelson College I was fortunate to attend Canterbury University in the hopes of getting a science degree. I remember geology was a subject I was very keen on. I remember only too well in a lecture with Professor Speight, when the 1929 earthquake occurred. The Professor yelled to us, 'get outside! Where's it coming from? Look at the wave coming down from the cathedral! Look out, look out!'

Professor Speight was then commissioned by the government to do a survey of the earthquake and the damage; this meant travelling from Christchurch to the Murchison district, to measure the earthquake at the fault where it crossed the Buller River. I was fortunate in being taken with them as a student, mainly to carry the bags.

The earthquake fault was 15 feet where it crossed the Buller. Professor Speight explained that the whole of the northern end of the South Island had tilted, so that actually no buildings which were once vertical, were vertical any longer".

Muir McGlashen

"I want to have a few words on the Murchison earthquake. This was 55 years ago this year. It was in July 1929. Sitting in school at approximately 10.20 and for some reason the whole of the room began to move. Not so much as a shake, but it was rather a rolling feeling. The electric lights hanging from the ceiling took a circular nose-dive, and they went round and round in circles.

The headmaster was in front of the class, and we were evacuated very rapidly and quickly outside and well away from the building. It was a wooden building and we would be reasonably safe in any case. But we were all rather surprised at the attitude. He in turn was rather surprised.

We had never drilled or practised a procedure of escaping from a building, but this went orderly and rapidly. We did practise this for a period of time afterwards. Getting out to the school grounds, everything seemed to be topsy-turvy and it was just not one quake, it continued to move and roll for a period of time afterwards as it did in some parts of the province".

Denis May

"I remember the Murchison earthquake very well. I was at college that day. Of course as you know, the college came down too – well most of it did. That was one of the exciting moments. It happened at twenty past ten in the morning and I can remember distinctly running out amongst all the fallen masonry, and down onto the ground outside. And the ground, I would think it was in waves. They must have been foot waves even in asphalt. It was terrific and looking on the brick wall and seeing the thing just going in and out. I don't remember the noise. There was probably too much noise going on. But trying to run downhill on this pavement with waves rippling, was most difficult. The college was destroyed. It was a real mess".

Hazel Williams

"In school days I suppose I was like other kids; always a wee bit timid about school. I think we were all worried about authority, more so than children today. One of the things that happened when I was there in the primers was the Murchison earthquake and we were all out in the playground having drill. We had Miss Jean Pird teaching us. She was what we called a pupil teacher and she must have only been young as I recollect, because in later life she didn't seem very much older than I did. And we were doing drill and she kept us jumping up and down doing our exercises, and so whereas other children were petrified about the earthquake; I wasn't at all scared. So she must have been a pretty clever person mustn't she.

We lived in an old two-stored house in Queen Street and there were lots of after-shakes, and we had to come downstairs and sleep in the dining room and thought it was great fun. I remember everyone talking about the people who were shaken out of the Maruia and came into civilisation as it were".

Dulcie Phipps

"When the Murchison earthquake was on, my husband was working near the boy's college. Of course I was terrified. I had this one little chicken, my eldest son who is now 56, terrifying thing, I think that's when my nerves gave out, in June 1929. My son must have been a year old.

I've never seen telephone wires literally whip the ground! I grabbed the baby and tore down the steps and right out to the backyard. The telephone lines just skipping they were, touching the road. And of course we had earthquakes and earthquakes and earthquakes – little ones for a long time after that.

My husband ran home because it wasn't very far away. The boy's college had collapsed, of course you've seen a picture of that haven't you? Well he was home very quickly.

Of course we were very worried about my aunt, being a widow over in Shakespeare Walk, so we gathered her up, and the baby, and we all went home to Mum! We stayed in Richmond for a week; well I didn't even want to go home, I was still terrified, oh yes".

Philip Kearns

"While I was working for Wilkes, in 1929, I was working on a house in Appleby and we were up in the roof framing, and all the ground started waving and the hedges wobbling. Everything swaying and swinging round quite a bit, and we wondered what was going on; when it occurred to us that it was an earthquake we scrambled down. And, out there well we didn't really notice it very much. But we were soon called to go to the old Saxton farm homestead where the chimney had fallen through the slate roof, and we spent the rest of the day taking the chimney down, brick by brick.

And when I got home I found my chimney had collapsed on top of the stove, so I had to take that out too."

Ruth Wilson

"I remember the Murchison earthquake. That was in 1929. Well, mother was an invalid, and I was getting her dressed when it happened. I said 'I'll lift you out of the window!' and she said 'Just be calm, we'll be all right'. Nothing happened in our house. We had double chimneys, but nothing broke, and nothing moved – no furniture. Our house was all right and we were all right. But Mrs Fowler, in Oxford Street, she came screaming up our passage-way; her chimney had fallen: saying 'Did you feel it, did you feel it?!

I can remember the different neighbours coming in to see if we were all right, including Mrs Holland in Oxford street. The shakes continued for quite some time. I can remember that because I got mother outside, and sat her in a chair on the path."

Phyllis Jones

"I can remember the Murchison earthquake. I was out pegging the clothes on the line for Mum, on a Monday morning I think it was. Everything started to go around and around and I fainted, and I didn't remember anything until I woke up on the couch in the kitchen. I can just remember cattle tearing around the paddock and trees going right over. There was no damage to our house. I don't remember the other one – that would have been later. I would have been married by then anyway".

Del McFarlane

"My recollections of the Murchison earthquake. I would have been in Standard 3 and our teacher was Miss Mabel Brown who was a Murchison girl. And I remember she made us all stay where we were in the classroom, although we could hear all the children in the other classrooms rushing outside. But the main memory that I have – she was an attractive person; she had pretty brown wavy hair – was that she was standing in front of the fireplace and I remember that the back of her hair just stood on end. And that later we were told; I think her mother and her brother were injured in the Murchison earthquake. But it is still quite vivid, that recollection of Miss Brown that morning".

Notes: Del was about 10 years old and a pupil of Richmond School in 1929.

Valmai Savage

"I remember going down to the station after the Murchison earthquake to see if any of our friends were on the train.

We were living in McShane's Road at the time. It was a Monday morning. I was pumping water at the time so I didn't feel it; what with the action of pumping. I remember mother coming out and dragging me away from the tree, I didn't know what was going on until I got away from pumping. I remember old Mr Hammond was driving along the road in front of our place and he never turned a hair. He didn't even feel it. We went and stayed in Tutaki (near Murchison) just 3 or 4 days after that and it was still shaking every now and then".

Maudie Sampson

"I was living in Spring Grove at the time of the Murchison earthquake. I was washing at the time and the washing was splashed out of the tubs. And the night – the moonlight night seemed extra bright. And there was a shake and you'd look out down the orchard, and the trees seemed to touch the ground as they shook. It was terrifying. It didn't do any real damage to our place though".

Myrtle Holland

"...Refugees from the Murchison earthquake, women and children, came down from Tapawera on the train. I remember brewing a large billy of tea when the train arrived at the station. You had all these women at the station offering 'I'll take two', or 'I can take children without parents', everyone was willing to help.

My parents had seven children at home and I remember Dad coming in and saying he was going to Murchison (he was on the P & T – Post and Telegraph) to help fix the lines. While he was away mother wrote and told him that they had twins. It was the goat".

Ian Wilson

“When the Murchison earthquake struck, in 1929 it was, it was pretty devilish really. We were behind the counter and everything started to fall off the shelves and making such a mess that we got out and stood on the footpath. And I could see, opposite, Jock Ingram’s house. And he was hanging onto his wife in the backyard; they were both swaying like billy-oh!

But it was a deuce mess to clean up, I can tell you! Broken saucers and God knows what”.

Notes: Ian worked for the Richmond Cash Trading Company in 1929.