



1879

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Looking down on The Camp from near the entrance to the Banbury Mine.

With little flat land and soil close to the Brakehead, this inhospitable ledge became a well-settled place for many decades. North-west winds were so strong that a few buildings had to be secured to solid rock with iron anchor and steel rope. A few anchors remain today, obscured by vegetation.

**SURVEY CAMP 1871 – 1880**

The first settlers on the Plateau were surveyors who established a tent camp near here, hence the Camp – a name that stuck for the narrow clifftop flat below the Brakehead. Incline builders were next to move in but most went down the Hill at weekends.

**THE SPINNER**

As the Incline neared completion and miners started underground at the Banbury Mine, the coal company undertook a building programme to house workers and their families in two-roomed cottages. Men were employed to cut, split and square the timber in a nearby gully from which it was hauled up a plank chute. The gully was called “The Spinner” because of a winch at the top which provided haulage power.

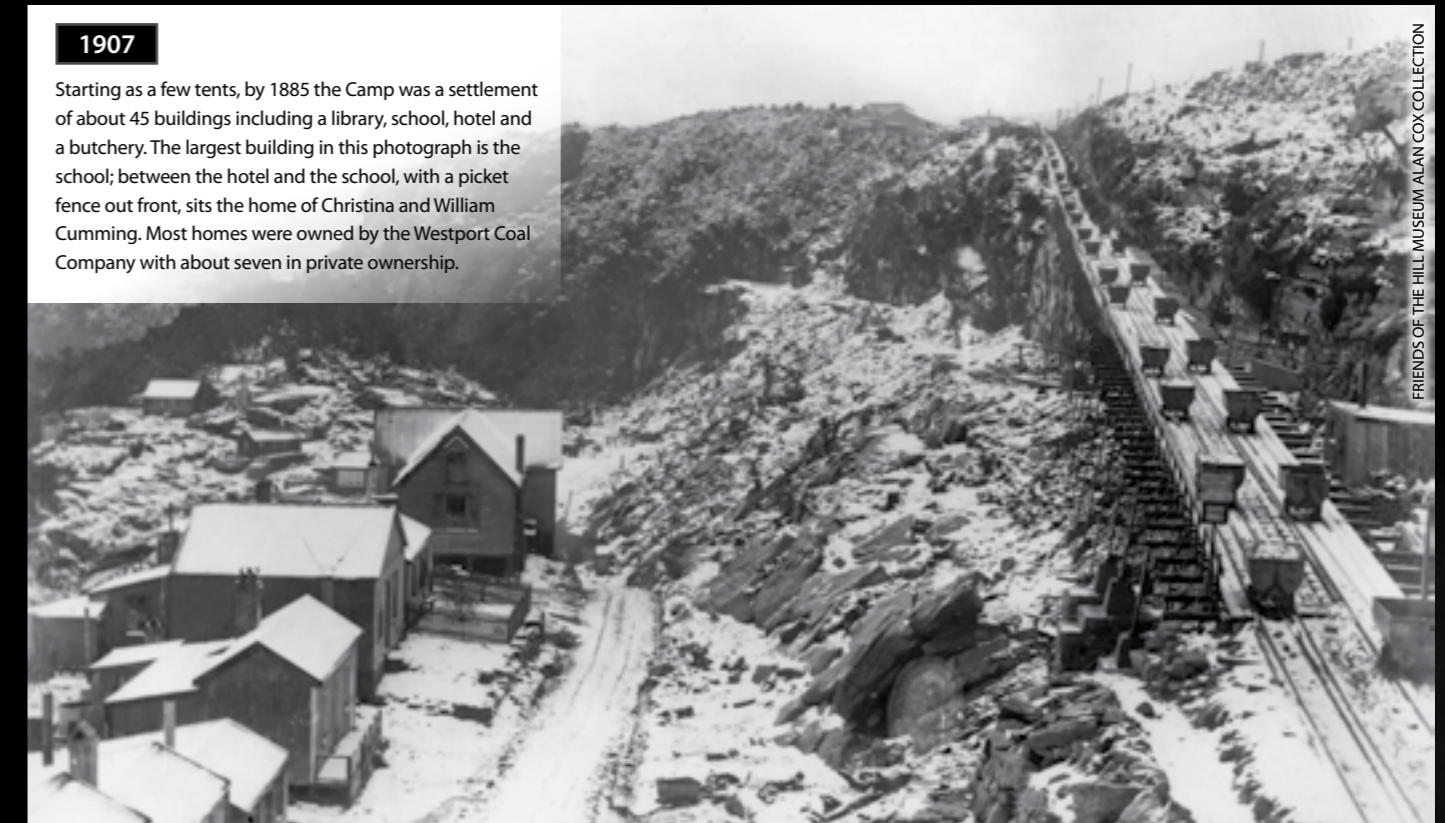


**FOUR WALLS AND A FIREPLACE**

Living conditions were basic in the completed cottages which were unlined and draughty. There was no running water and the toilet was a long drop over a crevice or a bucket that you emptied over the cliff. Cooking was done over a fire while kerosene tins served for many household purposes including heating water for baths and washing clothes.

**TENT LABOURS**

Over time, the Camp boasted more substantial houses, a hotel, a night-cart toilet service and Denniston’s first school. Despite the physical bleakness, including winter snow, there was at least one family that shunned a corrugated iron roof. Nicholas and Maria Milligan chose to live for six years in a tent at the Camp where four of their seven children were born.



1907

Starting as a few tents, by 1885 the Camp was a settlement of about 45 buildings including a library, school, hotel and a butchery. The largest building in this photograph is the school; between the hotel and the school, with a picket fence out front, sits the home of Christina and William Cumming. Most homes were owned by the Westport Coal Company with about seven in private ownership.

FRIENDS OF THE HILL MUSEUM ALAN COX COLLECTION

**DIRECTORS’ QUARTERS**

**A WESTPORT COAL COMPANY HOUSE**

The well constructed house that once stood atop these concrete foundations symbolised the age-old division between employer and employee. Directors’ Quarters, as the building was known, served as the accommodation base for the directors of the mine when visiting their investment. The house comprised several bedrooms, a living room and glassed-in veranda, a kitchen, running hot and cold water and a bathroom – features most of us take for granted today but compared to many of the Denniston miner’s homes, this one was spacious luxury.

**COMPANY PRIVILEGES**

Bill Elliot, whose father was the chief mines engineer, lived at Denniston from 1897 – 1917. Holding a company position meant that the family lived in one of the larger houses on the hill, one similar in size to the Directors’ Quarters. They had two big iron tanks for running water and a coal range that heated water in a boiler. The rooms were large – but Bill did have eight siblings so no doubt they filled them to capacity.



1947

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PETER ROBERTSON COLLECTION

Len Besset standing on a path that remains on site today.

1930s

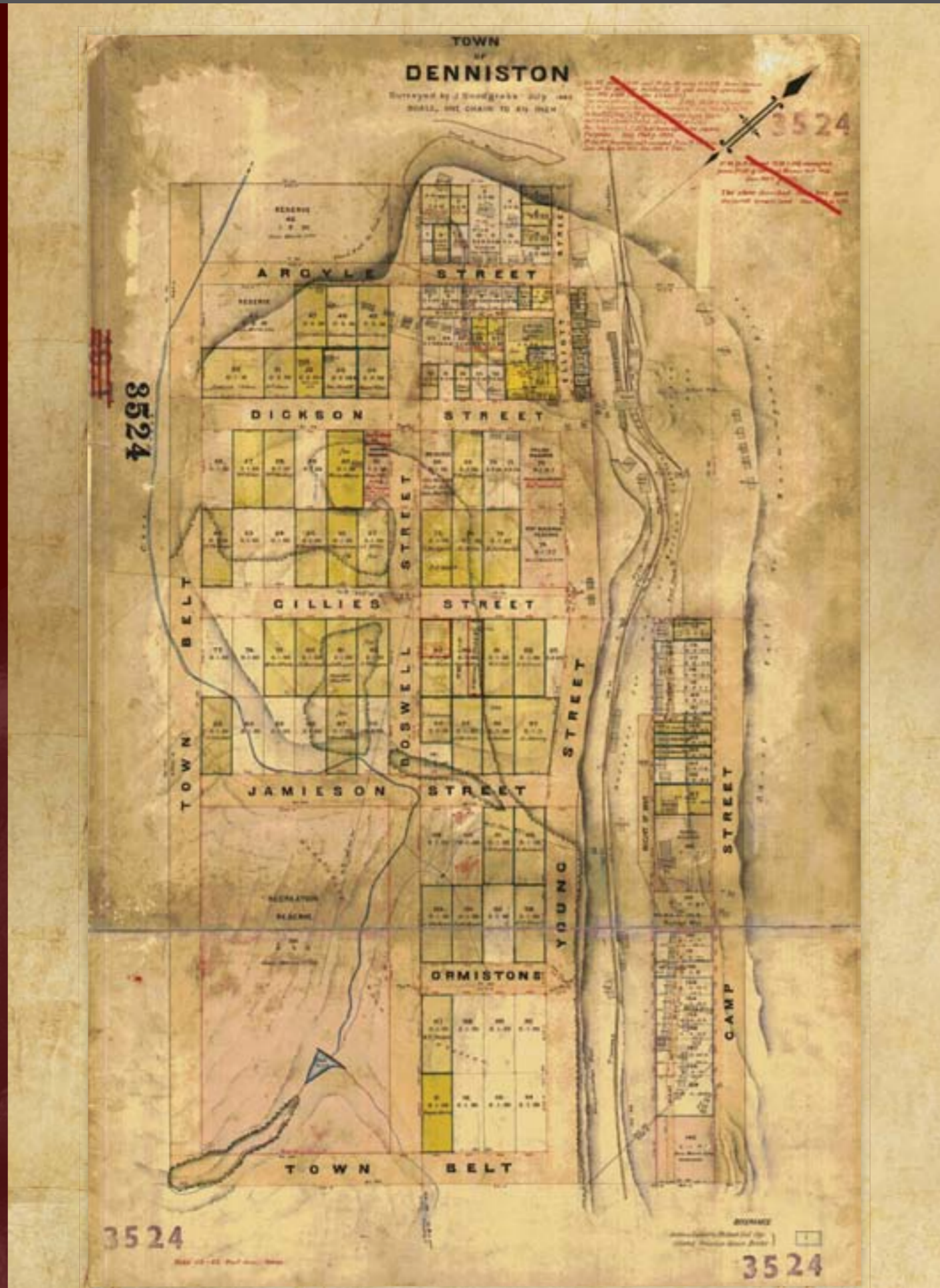
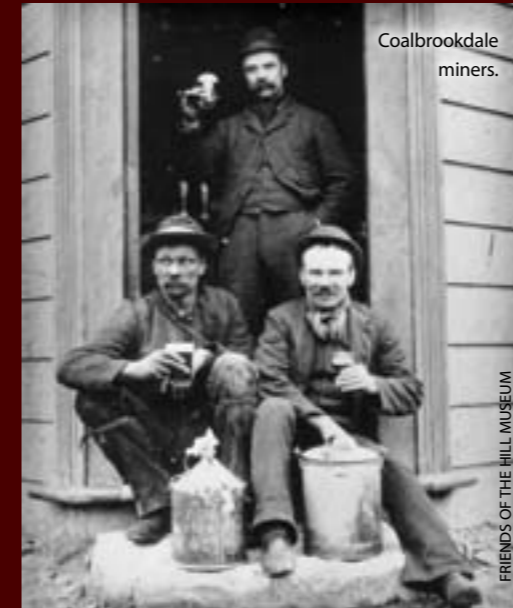


Image courtesy of Land Information New Zealand. Surveyed by J Snodgrass.

GETTING SETTLED

The two settlements of Denniston and Burnetts Face grew rapidly and by 1900 each had a library, school, post office and telephone rooms, as well as shops and halls. The community was well-served with hotels. Denniston always had the edge in population and facilities. It had the police station, fire station, school of mines, volunteer

hall and four churches. The hospital and other later additions such as the high school, bowling green, swimming baths, recreation ground and tennis courts were more centrally located between the two. The combined peak population approached 1500 in 1911, when Burnetts Face and environs mustered 627 to Denniston's 842. But when Denniston's official population (including Marshallvale, an area of new housing established in the 1920s) peaked at 910 in 1926, the Burnetts Face area had declined to 398.



Coalbrookdale miners.

FRIENDS OF THE HILL MUSEUM



Denniston Hospital 1945. The hospital opened in 1910. Around the time this photograph was taken, lives lost in mining accidents were about 2.5 per million tons of coal produced.

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Denniston Fire Brigade.

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**THE LURE OF LIQUOR**

With serious crime a rarity on the Hill, the main duty of Denniston's policeman was guarding the fortnightly pay roll. Other duties sometimes involved enforcing liquor laws. Official opening hours were 10am – 6pm but most miners were not clean and dry until just on closing time! The warm, spacious pub was a centre of social life (and some would say Unionism) on the Hill. Due to the efficient early warning system operated by the hotels and their patrons, very rarely did an after-hours prosecution take place. This drove the occasional policeman to frustration.

*Denniston miners Geoff Kitchin and Jimmy Robertson recalled one policeman who was determined to carry out some official business. He shared a few after-hours drinks with the miners then went home to don uniform, reappearing at the bar with his book*

*and pen. At first the men thought it a joke but no, they were all booked for after-hours drinking!*

*Another story recalls one miner who ignored the bath house each Friday and headed straight for the bar, remaining there all weekend drinking, playing cards and gambling, all covered in coal dust; his wife would arrive at the pub on Monday with his crib (lunch box of sandwiches and bottle of cold tea) and hand it over – with or without words was not recorded!*

*“We never had much but we enjoyed ourselves.”*

*“After a hard day underground the pub was spacious, warm, dry and full of good cheer.”*

Denniston Hotel 1945

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**MINER'S MAIDS**

In 1930 at the age of 14, Abbie Robertson had a “big lift in her fortunes”. She got a job at Tolls Hotel for 10 shillings per week. Abbie and the other girls who worked at the hotel started at 6am, preparing breakfast for the 36 miners who boarded there, finishing around 5.30pm after serving dinner for the men. A year later the girls were told if they joined the Union they would earn 4 pounds and 5 shillings per week. The proprietor said he would not pay those kind of wages but changed his mind when the staff all signed up and started to walk out the door!

**SPARSE GRASS**

Denniston folk grew up with cuts and grazes from the rocky grounds they played on – any grass was quickly worn away. One Denniston resident recalled the visiting Millerton soccer team that were not only distracted by the lack of grass. They were winning when the fog came down but this did not stop the local lads who were accustomed to listening for the ball. When the fog lifted it revealed Denniston playing fifteen-a-side! The bowling green, seen in the photograph below, opened in 1928 after much work levelling a piece of land with dynamite and carting lorry loads of turf up from Fairdown. During the Depression members cut the greens back to bedrock, imported new soil and reseeded them. The result was first class.



Denniston's bowling green.

FRIENDS OF THE HILL MUSEUM



The night cart, Tolls Hotel.

COALTOWN MUSEUM

**TIPPER TIN THOMPSON**

Denniston's night cart was, in fact, a day-time service – at one time carried out by Mr Thompson. The photograph above shows the horse-driven “dunny cart” parked alongside the Rochfort Hotel. The collection of toilet cans during the day caused embarrassment to many a person not expecting a visit.

*To Max Higgins, the smell of tar and Jeys Fluid disinfectant instantly reminds him of life at Denniston. Life, that is, in the outhouse. There were no flush toilets at Denniston, nor any long-drops. The rocky ground was too hard to dig. Instead, the toilet was located in a small outhouse. It had a wooden plank with a hole cut through for a seat. A can went under the seat through a trap door accessed from outside.*

*Once a week the “dunnyman” collected the full cans and replaced them with a clean one. He tipped the contents into the river just below the Iron Bridge Mine, scrubbed the cans with disinfectant and coated them in fresh tar ready for reuse. The service took a two-week break over Christmas. Max recalls having to deal with the visitor overload himself by sneaking out one rainy night and emptying the can into a swollen creek where it disappeared over a cliff.*



Mrs Brown and her grandchildren at the Brakehead.

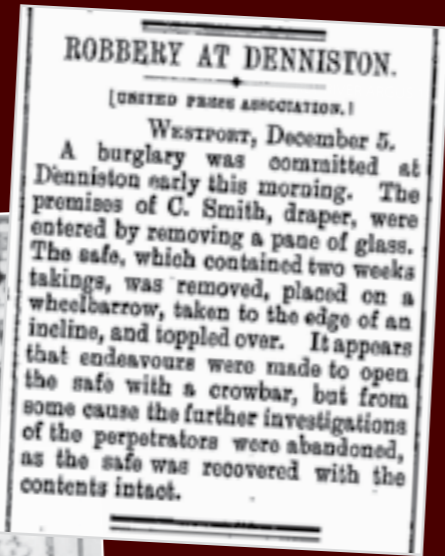
FRIENDS OF THE HILL MUSEUM

**NIGHT RAIDS**

Paddy's Pub, the most important place in Denniston to some, was struck by fire one evening. In the midst of the blaze old Mike made the most of the opportunity to secure some cheap liquor.

While everyone was involved in fighting the fire, Mike hustled his wife, Biddy, into the bar and loaded her up with bottles – two bottles of Johnny Walker down the front of her blouse, two bottles of rum and two of something else down her bloomer legs. Nonchalantly she left the pub and started across the street. At the same time the bottles began readjusting themselves down, forcing her into a duck-waddle gait before she was able to collapse against a corrugated iron fence.

Under the cover of darkness Mike and his wife carried the liquor home, Biddy blessing the strength of the elastic in her bloomers which stopped the bottles from breaking and leaving a large telltale wet patch on a dry road.



Denniston Football Club  
Second Fifteen Winners of  
Junior Cup 1898-1899

Back Row (left to right)  
A. Manderson (Manager), W.  
Jaspers (Forward), Meddlin  
(Forward), J. Cummings  
(Forward), J. Edwards (Forward),  
G. Jaspers (Three-Quarter),  
F. Bartholemew (Forward), J.  
Holmes (Secretary).

Middle Row  
W. Dunn (Forward), Mr Brown  
(Wing Forward), J. Morgan  
(Forward), D. Morgan (Centre  
Three-Quarter), A. Treveller  
(Five-Eight), J. Thomas (Wing  
Forward).

Front  
T. Leach (Wing Three-Quarter),  
A. Durin (Fullback), W.  
Henderson (Three-Quarter).

**HOME LIFE**

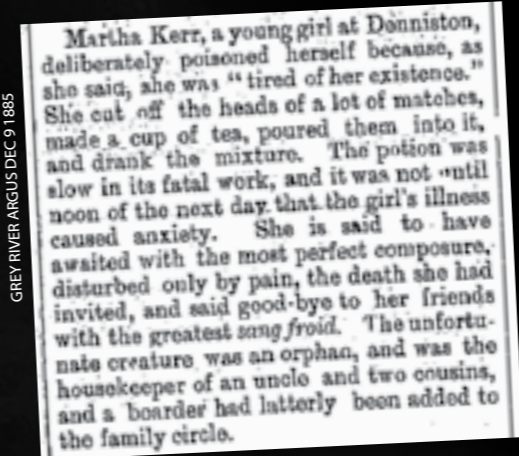
Muncies Recreation Ground behind Coalbrookdale. Mrs Driscoll and her daughter swing a rope at left while the Donaldson children can be identified at right by their bare feet.

*"We never locked the door if we went away on holiday, a neighbour might have needed something."*



**FREEDOM AND RESTRAINT**

Many Denniston women recalled their childhood at Denniston as full of outdoor freedom, sport, dances, music and school but full of household chores as well. Girls accepted baby sitting, housework and getting the men to work as part of home life which typically consisted of many siblings, cramped conditions and a lack of basic amenities complicated by frequent foggy and wet weather. Job prospects on the Hill were severely limited for girls but this did not dampen their enthusiasm for education. Many left Denniston with excellent school grades and scholarships to study further afield.



**A HARD HOME LIFE**

Throughout the entire history of Denniston the poor state of housing was a constant criticism in reports, such as those of a Royal Commission in 1919. Despite the "squalid" conditions of "little privacy and no baths", most people fronted up with a positive attitude and enjoyed what they had. With little soil on the Plateau, gardens were difficult to establish. Paying high prices for fruit and vegetables carted up the hill was an accepted part of living at Denniston. People formed bands and played their own music; learnt to dance and had "glamorous balls at the big hall"; and enjoyed theatre, movies and educational meetings nearly every night of the week.

As in every community, there was tragedy. A majority of accidents were mine related, but not all. The weather played its part. High gales one night blew two women off a bridge into a creek where they drowned. Many died during the 1918 influenza epidemic, as they did throughout New Zealand. Others chose to end their own life.

**BETTY PRENTICE SKEATS**

“The way my mother and all the women worked to keep their house clean. We never had much but Mum and the other women slaved their guts out keeping them clean. Scrubbing floors, the kitchen table, black leading the stove, polishing...even the door step. Sand soap, and lots of it, was used almost every day. I don't know why they did it. Just pride I suppose ... to bring some shine into their lives over the things they did control ... and everyone did it. And they didn't have detergents, vacuum cleaners, or the things we have today.”



*“We did a lot of scrubbing and polishing, including the floor of the hall. A lot of water and sand-soap was used and we oiled and finished off with dry cloths.”*

The photograph below was taken after the women of Burnetts Face had finished scrubbing and polishing the Mission Hall floor.



FRIENDS OF THE HILL MUSEUM



**NELSON EDUCATION BOARD.**  
**SCHOLARSHIP RESULTS.**

NELON, Jan. 20.  
The results of the Education Board examinations are:—

Junior Scholarship, £40.—	
Catherine Power (Denniston) ...	646
Clara Walker (Fernstown) ...	573
Helen Niven (Denniston) ...	562
Joseph Gibson (Millerton) ...	560
Junior Scholarship, £20.	
Vida Berry (Denniston) ...	534
Senior Scholarship.	
Arthur Scantlebury (Reefton) ...	1025
Ivy Cornwall (Reefton) ...	898
Beaumont Whitwell (Millerton) having accepted a junior national scholarship Vida Berry (Denniston) has been awarded a Board scholarship of £25 for two years.	

FRIENDS OF THE HILL MUSEUM



Burnetts Face wash day 1944.

**ABBIE ROBERTSON CURRAGH**

*“Wash days were quite a hassle with a large family. We had to boil up the copper and then rub the clothes on a wash board with a bar of soap that we usually made ourselves. It took a lot of time as the clothes were rinsed twice in double tubs and then put through the mangle. We climbed up the bank behind the house to peg them on the line. In winter it was so cold the clothes were freezing before we finished pegging them out. There was a pulley in the kitchen to dry them in winter or wet days.”*

*“Ironing took a long time as everything was starched in those days. The heavy flat iron was heated on the stove. To make sure it did not have any soot on it we rubbed it with salt. I usually had to iron 20 or more shirts a week and I dared not get any soot on them from the iron or else they would have to go back in the wash.”*

*“All us three sisters slept in a double bed. Had the same places every night. I always went to sleep on the front edge as I had to get up about 5am to help Mum with the lunches and fill the tea bottles for the menfolk. I also got breakfast for my brothers, Dad and the boarder we had staying with us. Also the younger ones had to be got ready for school and also myself.”*

FRIENDS OF THE HILL MUSEUM



Denniston wash day.



*“The school basketball court was a bit rough so we tried not to fall over. In the 1940s and 50s the Wednesday night High School 'Learners' Dances' were open to everyone, not just students. Rita Dobson played piano and a school pupil the drums. Dances finished at 10.30pm because of school the next day. We all walked home in the dark with no street lights. Few families had a car.”*

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