

A true Christian when courage was called for

Some months ago the photograph accompanying this article was first published in the Express in the hope that all three Salvation Army men in the picture could be identified. Sadly the two seated figures are still anonymous, but the paper had a perfect deluge of phone calls from people who not only wanted to identify the man standing as Envoy Stephen Buick, but also clearly enjoyed the experience of recalling that grand old fellow to mind.

The story that follows is for the benefit of those who never had the pleasure of knowing Stephen Buick (even if only by sight), and to recall the beginnings in New Plymouth of the Salvation Army which he loved and served with such faith and vigour.

Records show that the first Salvationists turned up in New Plymouth and started the local corps on March 1, 1884. An early account stated: 'Like in other parts of the world in those days, the town did not regard the introduction of the Army as an event to be welcomed. The spiritual fight was met by ridicule and physical force, and there were many limes when the small band of four or five men and women had their courage placed under very severe stress.'

It was indeed a stormy start, but, convinced of their mission, the courageous few turned the other

otherwise have slept out on the beach or on a park bench.

It mattered not whether a person was simply wandering looking for work, just released from prison, or seeking solace from the problems of the day in a drink bottle, all were made welcome. Up to 30 people a night were accommodated at Welcome Lodge throughout the period of 18 months, and it was indicative of the new found public 'discovery' of the Army's worth that all food dispensed at the Lodge was either donated or provided at cost.

It was at about that time too that many people first began to take notice of an old but tireless worker in Salvation Army uniform, the man they came to know as Envoy Stephen Buick.

Not that he was a total unknown. Far from it. It was just that in the 1930s people began to see Salvationists as individuals — good individuals — rather than as a navy-blue-and-maroon body of drum-thumpers who seemed to have been placed on the earth only to be the butt of people's jokes.

Stephen Buick was born in South Australia in 1857. One of 16 children in an outback pioneering family, he knew what it was to be hungry. As modern kids have to play their part in the family circle by making their beds or washing the dishes, young Stephen's role in life was to spend hours each day gathering shellfish and bird's eggs to supplement the family diet.

As a young man he knew temptation too, and became a drinker and a gambler. But one day a copy of the War Cry came into his hands, and from

that day he was a changed person. He joined the Salvation Army in Adelaide and served it well before deciding to help with the pioneering work across the Tasman.

Buick arrived in New Plymouth in 1886. From the outset he knew what his job was in life, and no amount of unwelcome attention from the town larks prevented him from doing it.

It was typical of him that when he built himself a bach, he fitted it out with four bunks and made it 'open house' to anyone, old or young, drunk or sober, vagrant or genuine work-seeker, in need of a bed for a night.

However his real ministry extended far beyond the untidy streets of New Plymouth. He found his acceptance, made his best friends and got his message over more easily out in the countryside where, even if people weren't interested in his religious ideas, he would never be turned away without being offered a cup of tea.

It was nothing to Envoy Buick to walk up to 60 kilometres a day, even after he had passed his 70th birthday. After that he was prepared to make a small concession and would take a bus, getting out at some place like Warea, Rainou, Stratford or Brixton, and then heading off for a tour of the backblocks with his bag of War Crys.

Incidentally, when he first came to New Plymouth, Buick became a postman, and gained a bit of notoriety in the service by refusing to wear anything other than his Salvation Army uniform on the job.

He retired from the job as early as 1909 in order to



Envoy Buick, a photo taken in about 1915.

cheek and persisted with their efforts. In the fullness of time the opposition would die out as the good works of the Army began to tell their own story. But yes, it took the courage of a Christian martyr to belong to the corps, even right up to the 1930s.

Sunday night meetings, first held in Courtney's auction rooms where Whites row stands, and then upstairs in a building in the Ian Lobb Chemist corner, were frequently broken up by young larks hurrying sink bombs.

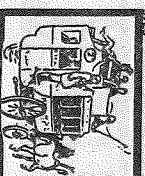
The police had to be called often to restore peace, but rather than have to rely on them arriving at the first sign of trouble, the Salvationists had to resort to giving their biggest member the title of official ejector, and to give him special dispensation to use whatever force was necessary to keep the meeting place secure.

If trying to survive indoors was difficult enough, any venture out of doors was a guaranteed 'adventure' to say the least. The best treatment the Salvationists could expect was a

both the Salvationists and their instruments were rather the worse for wear.

Yes, the life of a Salvationist was hard, but all the hassling in the world could not deter the members of the corps from carrying out their mission. They knew there was a need for their services in New Plymouth, and although it took 20-odd years, the more level-headed townspeople eventually began to come around to agreeing with that fact.

Not surprisingly, it took a disaster of the worst sort to finally open the eyes of those who had chosen not to open them before. It was the Great Depression that did it. For 18 months in 1933-34 the Salvation Army ran a welfare centre in Silver Street (a street which used to link Devon and Powderham Streets where the Atkinson Building now stands). Named Welcome Lodge, the centre occupied an old and tumble-down boarding house — not the average person's idea of home, but still a place of shelter and succour to many hundreds of people who would



PAGES FROM THE PAST



A young Stephen Buick (standing) when he still had 60 or so years of good Salvationist work ahead of him.

devote his entire time to the work of the Salvation Army, although he did go back to mail delivering during the war, and for a short period after the war (until 1922), relieving for men called away on active service.

At the age of 94 he was still walking 20 kilometres a day, and his raucous but cheery voice was still to be heard as far afield as Opunake and Whanganui-mona.

At one stage during the 1940s, cheered by the thought that he might be able to reach even more people, Envoy Buick became the proud owner of a Model T Ford which

became almost as legendary as its owner. It sure beat walking, and the old fellow was quite happy with this way of getting around. But one day in 1947 an accidental encounter with another vehicle (Buick wasn't in the car at the time) brought the Model T to an undignified end. Next day, quite unperturbed, Buick was back tramping the roads — at the age of 89.

Apart from his travelling feats, Envoy Buick must surely have held some sort of a world record for selling the War Cry. Until he was 90 he regularly sold 70 dozen copies per week; after that he 'eased off' to a modest 23 dozen a week.

It seemed to most people — and probably even to Buick himself — that he was going to be here for all times. At the age of 95 he was taken into hospital, listed as 'seriously ill', but he recovered. He allowed himself then to be admitted to Rangimarie Home, but no sooner had he been shown where his bedroom was than he was on his way down into town again, a stooped, touselled man in a uniform so old that it was actually green with age.

However, no man could go on forever, and Envoy Stephen Buick faded quietly away on December 1, 1953, at the age of 96.

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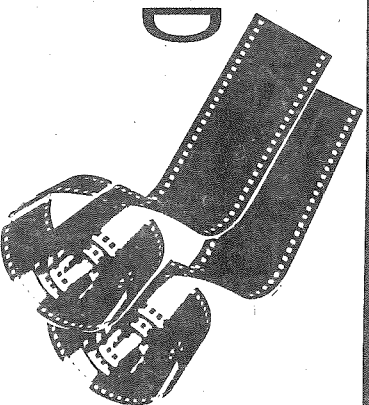
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