

## **Jesse Chamberlain's story, in her own words..**

Heather Brooker provided these notes from Jessie Chamberlain, who worked at Te Rangi hospital in 1930s as an aide before doing her nurses training.

I left college in December 1933, and had most of 1934 at home just helping mother. Then I got a chance to do nursing at Te Rangi, a private hospital in Collingwood Street and stayed there until November in 1935. The wages in those days were very poor and the hours long, and one day a week off, if possible. I made enough money to buy myself a black and white costume, towards my outfit to take to Christchurch the next year. [Mother, I'm afraid, had to fit me out with everything else. All clothes were made by Miss Newth and they really looked lovely, but when I saw some of my new classmates, dressed by Ballantynes, I felt very "home-made". Of course, most of the class were all in home-made clothes.] I loved the nursing at Te Rangi and was put into the maternity side straight away and spent most of my time there.

The first babies I saw born were just a miracle to me, and I still feel that same awe with a newborn babe. Some of them were very frail and they were kept in a basket on top of the coal range on the rack. The rack was like a grill, two-thirds at best from the top of the stove, so didn't get hot, just warm, so the babies were kept warm and most of them were able to go home. Others not so frail, had their bassinets in front of the range. The matron was very conscious of the danger there, so we were well supervised.

Another time a neighbour of ours in Tahuna came in to have her fifth baby. She had a son and daughter who were in my Sunday School class, then she had two more babies and they both died on the 10th day. Needless to say we watched this baby like a hawk. It was a strong, healthy baby and doing well, but on the 10th day it just suddenly died. We were absolutely shattered. She wouldn't have an autopsy for the other two, and I don't know if she had one for this one.

Another time we had two sisters come in, beautiful young woman, one very dark and the other fair. Both had little boys but the fair one knew she would die, as she had cancer, and so she did. We never got used to such early deaths and wondered why they were taken so young.

However, we did have our lighter moments. One I caused, we had the screens around the ward door to keep visitors out for a while, when I saw a man peering over the screen and said to him, "You can't see your wife yet". Poor man, he was a priest.

I was there for Christmas Day and was told to watch a woman in labour, and let the sister know when the head appeared. Everything was very new to me and I was scared stiff. I really didn't know what to expect. At least I knew where the head would come from, so kept looking and looking. At last some black hair appeared so I tore down to the dining room and spoilt their beautiful Christmas tea, as they had to take over.

I really learnt a lot there and when I started proper nurse training I found it very easy, I also know it was the only thing I wanted to do in life. Another time I was in the women's medical

I left Te Rangi at the beginning of November and went over to friends in Wellington for a holiday, arriving home in time for my 21st birthday in <sup>November</sup> 1935, but no party or many gifts, as the trip to Christchurch was expensive and the big depression was hurting everyone. Mother gave me her camera and cakes of soap from my friends, a lovely crystal sugar basin and jug from Ellen and Harold.