

Send-off with a difference

When my wife and I returned to New Plymouth for a few years at the turn of the century, the main thing drawing us back from the place where house prices have lately gone mad was an urge to spend time with aging parents prior to their final journey.

As it happened, there were a lot of other people we knew taking the same trip. We attended 11 funerals in our first year home. It got to the stage where I felt funeraled-out.

There was one exception, however, a send-off attended by hundreds of people filling St Mary's to the doors, who went away with a feeling that there was a life truly celebrated. The singing alone was extraordinary.

The widower left by that event finally passed away last week, a couple of months shy of 90. His last few weeks were spent being nursed at home by his loving family and looking out at the winter sea below his coastal home.

There was no way we wouldn't be going to Dandy's funeral. We knew what to expect, and none of the hundreds who packed the Oakura Hall on Monday would have felt anything other than uplifted by what transpired.

The word triumphal springs to mind to describe the burst of Louis Armstrong's What A Wonderful World accompanying the arrival of a hand-hewn coffin, borne into the building by the phalanx of family.

Rev Albie Martin - who'd stood at the door to welcome us individually - kicked off with solemnity, but you could tell from his tone there was an abundance of warmth and familiarity to come.

So it did. For during the next couple of hours we heard in increasingly emotional candour the details of a life that embraced all the things that make Taranaki a special place.

Dandy was a rural man. He'd learned to milk the house cow by the time he was five. He learned compassion when he wasn't much older, being required to help his ailing granny use the commode.

He became a stock agent, then an auctioneer, a calling he loved for all the later decades he practised it around the province. A daughter told of the familiar smell of sheep he came home with when she was little. It stays with her still.

The family lived at Inglewood, but ended up on the coast. Dandy got the land at a good price because in those days farmers reckoned anything too close to the sea copped salt spray. Today, you'd give your right arm to own such views. One of his sons built a resort there that attracts tourists from around the world.

Years back, we tented near the stream at the bottom of Dandy's farm. He and his family were affable visitors to our eccentric encampment, which sometimes housed 20. Our holidays there coincided with his birthday in January, so we'd cook them a feast over the fire that night, the skilled among us making the "landlord" presents from what they could find on the beach.

Stories like that tumbled out into the hall for an eternity that deeply affected us all. Two daughters and two sons spoke, all in startlingly different styles of delivery. The best joke concerned the inevitable divide between main religions that tracked every family of that era, with a punchline involving men of God hogging the fire in the depths of hell. Dandy apparently told it at some risk during one of the family weddings.

At one stage, a young blackbird flew up into the ceiling of the hall, did a few circuits above us, then vanished as mysteriously as it came. Could it have been him, we wondered?

Every grandchild spoke, as did a couple of great-grandchildren. One recounted sitting at Dandy's bedside in the last days while he gave her advice so sage she could recount every line. Two grandsons sent messages from remote parts of the world.

Voices faltered at times. That was only right, and expected. But when the singing came the harmonies were faultless, the voices so powerful you wondered where you were for long moments. We joined them in *The Saints Came Marching In* during the family's slow march with the casket to the door.

I forgot to say - Dandy wasn't his real name. That was what the grandchildren and great-grandchildren called him; probably a small child's endearing attempt at "granddad". His name was Bill Marshall. But I expect some of you already guessed that. Go well, Willy.