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## Suva – Once a Colonial Town

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My great-grandfather settled on Taveuni in 1868, so my sister and I are the fourth generation. She was born in 1931 and I followed in 1934. Our coconut and cattle plantation was the centre of our world and our only connection with Suva was the inter-island cargo and passenger ship that also brought our mail each month. There was the government-owned telegraph station, by which we could send morse code messages, and of course the radio. I had no concept of Suva as a place, except that I was told it was the capital of Fiji and the centre of our colonial government and business.

In 1944 my parents decided that my sister and I should go to the boarding school in Suva and I clearly remember that as a very daunting prospect. We embarked one day on the 400-ton inter-island ship *Yanawai*. It had six, two-berth cabins, a place for deck passengers and a cargo hold. The journey took one day to Savusavu, another day to Levuka and we cruised into Suva Harbour on the afternoon of the third day, landing at Princes Wharf, which was then a simple wooden decked structure. We boarded a taxi, and my mother said we were going to the Grand Pacific Hotel (GPH).

I remember my first images of that journey through the streets of Suva, which was not then considered a city – simply a large town – but to the boy from rural Taveuni it was an eye-opener. A real colonial town with cars, buses and lorries and dominated by the white elite – predominately British civil servants.



**Figure 14.1: Corner of Scott Street and Renwick Road, n.d.**

Source: P32.4.16 Fiji Museum.

The first big building I saw was the two-storey Burns Philp head office structure, now owned by the Fiji National Provident Fund retirement scheme. Burns Philp was then the largest trader in Fiji. That was also when I saw my first traffic cop, at the intersection of Thomson and Marks streets. He was a huge ethnic Fijian who stood on a raised platform, wearing a white serrated sulu and red jacket, directing the slow-moving traffic with white-gloved hands.

We crossed a small bridge over what I was told was Nabukalau Creek. The creek was as unimpressive then as it is today. On our left was the largest store in town – Morris Hedstrom. There was a branch on Taveuni so I knew about them. It was a long, wooden, single-storey shop with large plate glass windows. Just past it on the left was the Garrick Hotel, which I was told was one of the best in town. The building is now owned by Gokals. On the right I saw the green-timbered General Post Office, and beside it the very impressive cream, concrete Bank of New South Wales. It looked much the same then as today's Westpac.



**Figure 14.2: Nabukalou Creek, n.d.**

Morris Hedstrom building is on the right, and *bilibili* (rafts) are on the left making deliveries to the market.

Source: P32.6.25 Fiji Museum.

At the intersection of Thomson and Renwick roads stood the *ivi* tree and another uniformed policeman directing traffic. My mother pointed out Boots the Chemist, Levy's Jewellery store, Caines photography store, McDonalds Hotel, Bank of New Zealand and Melbourne Hotel. As we passed Central Street I could see the waters of the harbour that lapped against the sea wall behind the bank. There was no marketplace nor car park in those days. Also in Central Street, where Bank South Pacific now stands, was a one-storey wooden structure where, my mother said, were the offices of Suva's top lawyers and accountants.

Beside Central Building was the Regal Theatre. More about that later. I was far more impressed with the fire station beside the theatre. Parked in the open doorway was a large red fire engine, the only one in Suva, I was told. A far cry from the McDonalds that is now there.

The sea washed against the wall of the fire station and Victoria Parade, as the whole of the Sukuna Park area was then part of the harbour. We passed the massive bulk of the Carnegie Library and I saw the lattice work on the first floor balcony of what was then the Town Hall.



**Figure 14.3: Carnegie Library, n.d.**

Source: P32.4.18 Fiji Museum.

Beside it was the bowling green, and then I had my first look at my future home away from home – the cream-coloured walls and arches of Boys Grammar School and the sports field. There were no buildings between the school and the GPH where we were to stay – just a long wall holding back the sea. But on the land side of Victoria Parade were the squat, grey Government Buildings, which seemed to symbolise the power and authority of the Colonial Government.

At the entrance to the GPH we were welcomed by a large Punjabi with a green turban and white jacket with green cummerbund. I was impressed by the architecture of the GPH, which was so different to any structure I had ever seen. As I look at it today, still basically the same, it seems to epitomise as much grandeur as it did then.

I was taken to Boys Grammar School and my sister to Girls Grammar School. On the first floor of BGS there were three dormitories – the junior, middle school and senior. I was put in the junior dorm with nine other boys from Taveuni, Savusavu, Levuka, Vatukoula, Ba and Lautoka. I did not know any of them, but our matron was a lady who had been matron of Taveuni District Hospital, so that was some comfort.



**Figure 14.4: Interior of the Grand Pacific Hotel, n.d.**

Source: P32.6.28 Fiji Museum.

My sister was taken to a similar style building, which is now part of the education department, situated beside the Fiji Club on the hill.

The strange anomaly of our education was that the primary education was conducted at Girls Grammar while the secondary education was conducted at Boys Grammar. So my sister attended classes at Boys Grammar while I went to Girls Grammar.

The students at BGS were all white. Ethnic Fijians and Indian people were not admitted and only a restricted number of mixed-race students were. Suva was then a very racially divided town.

While there were a number of other schools in and around Suva there were no interschool sports competitions. In fact the main sports were traditional British games like cricket, tennis, bowls, hockey and some rugby. Next to the BGS, where the Development Bank now stands, was the school's playing field. But we junior boys usually played marbles. On the sea side of the school was a shed where the Sea Scouts and Sea Cubs had their various activities. There was also a boat moored by the sea wall where we fished.



**Figure 14.5: Welcoming Charles Kingsford Smith's aeroplane *Southern Cross* at Suva, Fiji, 1928.**

Source: Milton Vikery (1928), 1467-ALBUM-274-106-5, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections.



**Figure 14.6: Aerial view of Grand Pacific Hotel, Albert Park and Government Buildings, n.d.**

Source: P32.4.103 Fiji Museum.

The main sports field was Albert Park, where I was told Kingsford Smith landed on his flight across the Pacific. I had never seen a plane so could not assess the suitability of the park as an airfield. The other main sports field was Buckhurst Park out at Suva Point. None of the schools with their large playing fields now situated around the peninsula existed at that time. In fact in the 1920s that area had been a horse racetrack.

At that time, Laucala Bay was the base for the Royal New Zealand Air Force (RNZAF) Catalina and Sunderland flying boats that were moored within the massive stone breakwater, which had been constructed to protect them from the south-easterly winds. The breakwater remains today. When the aircraft were on land they were housed in a huge hanger that has long gone.

Laucala Bay was also the international gateway airport. In 1946, when I went to boarding school in Melbourne, we flew out of Laucala Bay on a Sunderland flying boat owned by Tasman Empire Airways Limited. Nadi was then still a military base and there was no airport at Nausori.

The RNZAF staff were accommodated in green and cream wooden buildings where the University of the South Pacific is now located. Officers were housed in an area that became known as Suva Point, accommodated in well-constructed wooden homes made of good quality imported pine. Many of them remain today.

Another exclusive residential area was the Domain, where British civil servants were housed in large wooden bungalows or in elegant British-style cottages. They were surrounded by manicured lawns and neatly trimmed hedges of tropical plants. Sadly, today most of the Domain is badly neglected.

There were then two movie theatres in Suva – in fact the only ones in Fiji. The Regal Theatre was beside the fire station and the Lilac was on the corner of Waimanu and Toorak roads. Movies were shown by 35 mm projectors and in 1944 I saw my first movie – *The North West Mounted Police*. It was an amazing experience. The rows of seats sloped from the cheaper ones at the front, very near the screen, to the higher-priced ones at the back. White people sat at the back and others at the front. We boys often went to the Lilac on a Saturday afternoon to see cowboy serials, or one about a superhero of the time – *The Green Hornet*.

There was little industrial activity in 1944/45. Along Rodwell Road, past Burns Philp, was a biscuit company, a soap manufacturer, the coconut oil mill and a fuel storage base. Walu Bay was just a mangrove swamp and a gravel road ran through it, past the cemetery and out to Lami, where there were a few homes.

Waimanu road was the main access north. Past the Colonial War Memorial Hospital were a number of homes on the ridge overlooking Suva Harbour where white business and professional people lived. Tamavua was mostly vacant scrub land with just a few palatial homes.

Because Fiji was a British colony, the Church of England was the pre-eminent religion. Its wooden cathedral on Gordon Street was later demolished and a new one built on the present site. The Catholic cathedral was in Pratt Street and the Methodist church in Marks Street. There were also some Hindu temples.

I don't recall then having any sentimental attachment to Suva as I had for my home on Taveuni. But I seem to remember my first pangs of patriotism when we were told in 1945 that the war was over. I vividly remember standing in class singing 'God Save the King'. There were great celebrations in and around the town and people seemed very proud of the part Fijian soldiers had played in the Solomon campaign.

Fast-forward to the year 2000.

By then my family and I were living in our home at Tamavua, a suburb that had developed into one of the main residential areas. Many international organisations had offices and residences in the area. There were new subdivisions, supermarkets and good roads. Many people from rural areas had drifted into the city to find work. Low-cost housing areas had sprung up and there were many more poor people.

Colonial rule was over. Fiji had become independent in 1970; a moving ceremony had been held at Albert Park. Suva had grown tremendously since the 1940s and had become a city. A great deal of land on the foreshore had been reclaimed from the harbour and multistorey buildings constructed along Victoria Parade. Sukuna Park was a place for people to gather and there was a new city hall, new hotels and movie theatres, and the population had exploded. The racial divisions of the 1940s had gone and the population was warm and friendly. Suva had become a tourist city with tourist ships calling regularly at Kings Wharf. This had been rebuilt



to cater for the ever-increasing number of container and tourist vessels. The huge market nearby was a centre of attraction and the adjacent bus station was the busiest place in the city. Walu Bay had been fully reclaimed from the mangroves and had become the centre of industrial activity.

One of the important decisions by the government had been to move Parliament out of central Suva to a new parliamentary complex at Draiba. This was an imposing *bure*-style structure with offices for the prime minister and parliament staff.

The area around the peninsula had become the main educational centre of Suva, with a number of schools and training institutions having been established. The University of the South Pacific had grown to become the dominant university of the region and the Laucala Bay area became the sporting centre of Fiji, with good facilities for most sports.

Fiji and Suva were on a progressive path into the new millennium. People were confident. The economy was booming. Then in 2000 it all came crashing down after an Indian was elected to be prime minister. A gang of thugs led by George Speight took control of Parliament and rampaged through the city causing absolute chaos. I sat on the verandah of my home in Tamavua looking down on Suva and watched with horror as flames and smoke billowed into the skies about the city. But the real damage was done to the morale and confidence of Suva's citizens.

Fast-forward to 2018.

Suva is fortunate that following the 2000 upheavals a strong and capable government emerged to restore the faith of the citizens and introduce strategies to grow the economy. Business confidence led to commercial expansion in the city and along Grantham Road, Nasēsē, Samabula, Nasinu, Nabou and all the areas along Ratu Mara road to Nausori. Vast sums have been spent on the roads in and around the city. However prosperity has led to many more vehicle owners and traffic congestion.

One of the significant actions taken by the government was to move Parliament back to the Government Buildings in the city. The whole structure was restored to its former glory and projects an inspiring image of a dynamic nation and city.

There was a time when the city ratepayers voted for a council, which in turn elected a mayor and they managed the city affairs. Now there are no elections, simply an administrator appointed by the government. While the government is voted into power democratically, and while there is a free TV, press and radio to monitor its affairs, the citizens have no control over the management of the city. Yet it is a place where thousands of people of all races have spent most of their lives. A place where they have found peace, security and happiness in an otherwise troubled world.

Despite the passage of years and changes in power and ethnic diversity, Suva has always retained a distinctive character or ethos that makes it different from other towns and cities around the world. When people walk along its streets they invariably eyeball each other, or smile faintly, as if to say ‘hello’ or ‘I hope all is well with you’.

This attitude can be traced back to the unique Fijian concept of *vakaturaga*, which embraces respect, humility, kindness, tolerance and understanding.

As a 10-year-old in 1944, when I walked to the Lilac Theatre to watch movies, I vaguely recall sensing an attitude that was different to that I’d known on Taveuni and that I could not then define, but now understand.

Now, as an elderly man, I am inspired when people I’ve never seen before smile as we pass in the street, for I know this is not a superficial expression, but is deeply ingrained.

This is what makes Suva different.

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