

**Miss Nettie Birkenhead RILEY:
'one who understood'**

‘As a founder and trained disciple of kindergarten methods she was able with her technical knowledge to listen and instruct, but she had something greater than that made possible by skilled apparatus - she had heart. How many children in our district – nay in larger towns - will revere her memory as “one who understood” (Hutt News, 10 October 1934,5)



Figure 1 Miss N.B. Riley, Lower Hutt Free Kindergarten Association. Photographer unknown.

**Written for the Lower Hutt Kindergarten Association
on the occasion of their 90th birthday celebrations**

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On May 3rd 1928, a public meeting of interested people including many parents and presided over by the Mayor, Mr W T Strand, was held at the Lower Hutt Council Chambers to discuss the formation of a community-based free kindergarten in the area. Mr Strand in his speech emphasised 'what a boon to many mothers such an institution would be' and announced that a venue had been acquired in the newly built public hall at Moera, due to be opened in about four weeks. Miss Nettie Birkenhead Riley, past principal of the Wellington Free Kindergarten Association and a Lower Hutt resident, spoke providing both support for the scheme and information about government funding. Further support came from Messrs May and Wilson, of the Waiwhetu School Committee and 'several ladies'.

Two weeks later, at a second public meeting, it was agreed to form a Lower Hutt Kindergarten Association. Professor Hunter of Victoria University College, an experimental psychologist, spoke strongly in support of kindergarten provision for children's development of learning and the need for such a facility in the area. Those present agreed, and a committee of enthusiastic residents was elected with Mr Strange as president and Miss Riley acting temporarily as secretary.

A survey carried out in the recently developed suburb of Moera, and reaching into nearby Waiwhetu, found an estimated 300 children of kindergarten age; sufficient to justify the establishment of a kindergarten. Moera was established on land that had previously been farmland and was now home to the Petone Railway Workshops where Government sponsored homes ("railway houses") were built for workers. By May 1927, 600 kitset homes had been built in Moera bringing an influx of young families to the new suburb.

The Lower Hutt City Council, supportive of preschool provision in the area, made available space in the newly built Moera Community

Centre for a kindergarten at no cost. Miss Riley was appointed as the principal.

Miss Nettie Birkenhead Riley

Nettie Birkenhead Riley brought to her new position extensive experience and expertise in kindergarten work. Born in 1882 in Sydney, Australia to Alban Joseph Riley (1845-1914) and Eleanor Harriett Riley (1851-1922): Nettie grew up in a family who upheld a strong social conscience and were active in the community. Eleanor Riley's obituary describes her as being one of a 'that generation of public women who set the standard for charitable work in this city.' She was known for her 'sane judgement, her breadth of view and her unfailing sympathy for those in need'. These were qualities and values Nettie Riley was seemingly imbued with and brought with her to New Zealand.

Upon leaving school, Nellie Riley entered Sydney Kindergarten Teachers' College sometime around the turn of the twentieth century. Around 1905 she was appointed Director of Surry Hills Kindergarten where she remained until her resignation in 1912. Her departure was noted with regret in the kindergarten's annual report.

Miss Nettie Riley has gone to do important organising and training work in New Zealand. Surry Hill and the KU generally, sorry as they are to lose her for New South Wales, can but rejoice at her promotion, and wish her all success in her new and important sphere.

Principal - Wellington Free Kindergarten Association

Established in 1905 through the endeavours of Miss Mary Richmond and her supporters, the six-year-old association, then known as Richmond Free Kindergarten Union, later Wellington Free Kindergarten Association (WFKA), operated four kindergartens and a teacher-training programme. As their newly appointed principal, Miss

Riley carried the association's deep hopes in her ability to oversee the pedagogical work within the kindergartens and to drive their recent revamped kindergarten teacher training programme.

Riley's monthly and annual reports for her first two years provide glimpses into the work involved. In addition to her responsibilities for the association's teacher training programme and its existing four kindergartens, Riley was involved in fundraising endeavours, mentoring staff, information sharing on kindergarten work, establishing working relationships with government, with parents and within the community as well as keeping up to date with new pedagogical ideas and promoting discussion. Her endeavours were recognised by the WFKA President in her Report for 1926, 'Again, we have been fortunate to have Miss Riley as Supervisor. Her work with children is always beautiful and wins us many friends. It was a position she held for 15 years.

In 1927 Miss Riley resigned from the WFKA, and following a stream of farewell functions at which her work was highly praised, she took a holiday in Sydney. On her return to Wellington, she became involved in plans to form a Lower Hutt Kindergarten Association. Details are scant, but it seems Miss Riley carried out the survey, canvassing the area to see if there would be enough children to start a kindergarten.

The opening of Moera Kindergarten

Unwilling to wait for the formal opening of Moera Hall, the new association organised an informal gathering for Monday 6 August 1928, attracting a large attendance of mothers and children from the surrounding area. Forty children were enrolled immediately leaving twenty places to be filled later. Miss Riley then held the first session with the children and their mothers followed with a special morning tea and a new tradition to celebrate on the kindergarten's first birthday. The *Evening Post* for 7 August 1928 reported:

After enrolment and a talk by the principal, a photograph was taken to mark the occasion, followed with kindergarten games played. Morning tea followed, at which the special celebration cake, gaily decorated with cherries and one candle, was cut and enjoyed. The cake's candle was carefully set aside for the kindergarten's first birthday cake.



Figure 2 Moera Kindergarten. Petone Library Heritage Collection. Date unknown.

The undated photograph above, named simply as Moera Kindergarten may have been taken on the day. It fits the description given in the newspaper. The photo shows children sitting at child-sized tables set for food. Behind the children, in the middle of the image stands Miss Riley in her kindergarten smock. The woman third on her right is possibly her assistant, Miss Helen Dawson.

The official opening of the kindergarten took place on 27 October 1928. Friends of the kindergarten, along with local parents and

children, gathered to attend the official opening by Her Excellency Lady Alice Ferguson. The new kindergarten operated with two certificated teachers: Miss Riley and Miss Helen Dawson, a recent WFKA graduate. Three voluntary helpers provided further assistance.

With the roll set at a maximum of 65 children, Miss Riley gave priority firstly to children of committee members, followed by those children who have attended other kindergartens and thirdly children of parents whose mothers had other children under three years of age. Miss Riley felt the latter group were the mothers who most needed help. She soon established a Mothers' Club that, she said later, provided practical, helpful interest in the Kindergarten and was a great support in times of need.

The need for financial and practical support.

Growth and survival was dependent upon financial and practical support. Practical assistance came through the generous work of community volunteers and businesses that responded to the constant appeals for help such as baking for sale at street days, goods donated directly to the kindergarten or as prizes for social events. The work involved to cater for such activities was often considerable. For example, the Children's Fancy Dress party in August 1931 provided for over 140 children and a large number of parents and friends. Supper was 'a delightful affair for, in addition to soft drinks and fascinating things to eat, each small person received two packets wrapped in fancy paper, one containing biscuits, the other sweets – to be demolished at home'.

The Lower Hutt community regularly provided much-appreciated donated goods to the kindergarten. Miss Riley, having learnt early that to ask was to receive, was not slow in putting out regular requests for items such as in the *Hutt News* on 29 November 1928.

Miss Riley will be thankful for gifts of old pieces of carpet runners, or carpet samples; odd saucers, vases that will not fall; old or new picture books (these are badly needed); toys, large cotton reels, old linen, either coloured or white for handkerchiefs and doyleys; cardboard, coloured paper, which may be crepe, art, glazed (much needed); paperhangers' examples, etc.

Next came the constant work of raising funds and securing other assistance for the running of the kindergarten. Riley drew upon her earlier experience of successful fundraising projects such as subscriptions. For a 21-shilling fee, the public could become members of the association. In just over a year, the Association attracted a healthy number of members. Individual donations came from various supporters. The bulk of the funds came from regular fundraising events undertaken by members and associates. For example, on 3 August 1931 the *Hutt News* reported funding endeavours over the previous year included: 'a Cake Day, held in March; Jumble Sales, Raffle of Dolls House and Christmas Hamper; Euchre Parties and monthly dances. [and] a concert.'

A national funding crisis

Things worsened in December 1931 when at a time of an economic depression, the Association, along with all other associations throughout New Zealand, received notification without warning that the Government was to cease all funding grants for kindergartens at the end of the year. It was a severe blow. With the annual cost need to run the kindergarten being £500, of which the government subsidy paid £250, the association was already heavily involved in ongoing fundraising to find a further £250. Now the loss of the government grant doubted the amount they needed to find.

Miss Riley's annual report for 1932 records the difficulties faced. It was, she wrote, "one of the hardest that I, as Principal, have ever known." Cuts were required, the most significant being the loss of the paid assistant. The kindergarten remained open with 60 children with Miss Riley as the only qualified teacher assisted by two inexperienced, voluntary helpers and six mothers rostered to come in one day a week. The mothers' club provided a practical, helpful interest in the work and Miss Riley expressed her appreciation saying she found them a wonderful help through this difficult time.

Lower Hutt branch of the League of Mothers - Creche

Community participation went two ways with Miss Riley building links with local groups such as the Lower Hutt branch of the League of Mothers (LoM) established in November 1926. Miss Riley served both as a member of the Moera Committee and as a 'valued and willing lecturer to the branches throughout the whole district.' As WFKA principal, she had been invited to address the second meeting in December 1926 to 'talk to the Mothers on the Christmas Spirit and how best to implant it in our children.' The minutes of the meeting record she was the chief interest in the meeting and fascinated those present with her talk. She soon became a familiar figure within the branch promoting, along with sound child-rearing practices, the value of kindergarten for children.

One of Riley's many contributions was the establishment of a crèche for the children of the mothers attending LoM meetings, thus providing children with space and play equipment and freeing mothers to focus on the speaker and other activities. The minutes for the meeting on 17 May 1928 record the crèche's opening, with thirty children in attendance under the care of a Miss Kersley. A room was furnished upstairs and provided with dolls and toys and with the assistance of some younger members 'the bairns were happy and the mothers were now able to enjoy and receive instruction from the

Lecture.’ In September Lady Alice Fergusson attended the meeting and later visited ‘the bairns and expressed great delight at the Institution, desiring a photograph of the first organised Crèche in the same building, in connection with the N.Z. League of Mothers.’



Figure 2 Lower Hutt League of Mothers & Homemakers Crèche. Photographer and date unknown. Alexander Turnbull Library

While the benefits of the crèche continued to be valued, it was also recognised that this being made possible by the self-sacrifice and arduous work of the voluntary crèche convenor Mrs Shearer and her helpers. It was systems that over time became more cumbersome and increasing inefficient and at times that Miss Riley needed to lend a helping hand. In June 1934 she took matters into her own hands to offer the services of the kindergarten teachers to staff the crèche. The branch gratefully agreed, recording in the minutes that ‘A small remuneration will be paid for their services. This will obviate the necessity of appealing to the mothers to assist in the work.’

In July 1933 demand came from within Moera mothers to launch a new branch of the League of Mothers in Moera. Miss Riley was

selected as a member of the provisional committee, thus expanding her contribution to the organisation.

May 1934 – Illness

Nettie Riley suffered from ill health that necessitated regular periods of sick leave. The community came together on such occasions such as in 1931 when Miss Riley's absence due to illness required local volunteers to cover in her absence. Writing in her annual report she expressed gratitude:

[For the] Innumerable acts of thoughts and kindness shown by the parents. Personally the loyal support and generous help given by the committee, staff, and parents to do the work generally and to me during my enforced absence through illness, has proved how sincere is the sympathetic interest and affection the community has for the welfare of the work and for those who carry it on.

In May 1934 Riley was granted three months leave of absence to visit her brother who was a medical practitioner in Sydney. She was not to return. On September 27, 1934, she unexpectedly passed away aged 56. The outpouring of sympathy that followed from various groups – too many to recount – is a testament to the esteem in which Nettie Riley was held. The LHFKA released a statement saying she 'earned the respect and affection of a large number of residents of the district as much through her personal charm and radiant character as though her sterling service as principal'. The LoM wrote:

Staggered by this blow, we bow in thankfulness for the one who shared her life with so many. Large-hearted, generous to a fault, she had a detestation of cant, humbug and meanness. ... Like so many large-hearted souls her never-failing cheerfulness was often a veneer to cover real anxiety, physical weakness and difficult problems. But the world saw only the sunshine – the shadows she kept to herself.

The association actively remembered Nettie Riley's memory over the following years. Two unveilings took place, the first in Moera Hall on 26 November 1934 when a framed photograph was hung in a prominent place (see Figure One). The second event in May 1935 was the unveiling of a simple monument in the form of an ornamental birdbath installed in the reserve surrounding Moera Hall. Riley's contribution was later recognised through the re-naming of Moera Kindergarten as Riley Kindergarten.

Miss Riley's role as director was taken over by her valued assistant Helen Dawson, now married and known as Mrs Atkins. Speaking in 1935 Atkins acknowledged the need to provide the kindergarten with a continuity of experience.

When the death of Miss Riley, our beloved principal came in September, it cast a gloom over all these connected with kindergarten work. ... Her position is a very difficult one to fill; in fact to take her place is impossible, but we know her earnest wish would be that the kindergarten continue in the same way.

Emphasizing the vital necessity of community support, Atkins continued, I do sincerely hope that the incoming committee will have the support not only of the parents of Moera, but that of the Lower Hutt residents. Their help is badly needed (*Hutt News*, 27 February, 1935) .

Atkins established a new tradition, where at the annual Christmas Party a selected child placed a posy of flowers under the Miss Riley's photograph hanging on the Moera Hall wall.

Miss Riley was further honoured at an event in August 1936, when twenty graduates of the WFKA attended a dinner party organised by the Association in their honour: the first gathering of its kind. The *Evening Post* on 17 August 1936 reported on the occasion:

Three toasts were proposed including one by Miss Scott to “The Kindergarten” to which Miss Wilson, the current Principal replied with reference to the ‘great work of the early pioneers in kindergarten – Froebel and Montessori; also of the Wellington pioneers, Misses Richmond and Riley.

Conclusion

The mayor, Mr J W Andrews in his 1934 speech at the unveiling of Miss Riley’s memorial photograph said, ‘The greatest tribute they could pay to her memory was to ensure the successful continuation of the work she had stated.’¹ Seventy-two years on, the Association’s nineteen kindergartens demonstrate continuation and growth of service to the children and families of Lower Hutt. Nettie Riley found joy in building celebrations for children into the rhythm of the kindergarten life, with events such as the candle tradition, children’s concerts, flower shows and the annual children’s Christmas party with its giant Christmas tree, and a present for all, a tradition reflected in the Vintage Fair Day planned for 3 November 2018 to celebrate 90 years of kindergarten in Lower Hutt. This public event, involving banners, balloons, food and music, honours her work in a manner that would have gained Miss Riley’s full approval – along perhaps, with a polite query as to why the necessity for community kindergarten fund raising still existed.

