

James Smith LESSELS and Bertha MANSSSEN

(Weblink MA Bertha Manssen & James Smith Lessels)

(also Weblink LS Lessels Manssen 1900 New Zealand)

(Weblink Bertha's parents MA Charles Frederick Henry Manssen & Emma Elizabeth Marris)

James Smith LESSELS

B 11 April 1865 Middlesex England

D 11 April 1934 Nelson New Zealand

1st M 06 July 1895 New Plymouth (1 Issue)2nd M 04 July 1900 Nelson New Zealand (10 Issue)**Mary Ann ORGAN**

B 15 July 1872 New Zealand

D 03 March 1897 New Plymouth New Zealand

Bertha MANSSSEN

B 09 April 1878 Stoke Nelson New Zealand

D 05 June 1919 Nelson New Zealand

Children:

1. Ivy Gillies LESSELS born 27 April 1896 New Plymouth
2. Louis Alexander LESSELS born 08 September 1901 Nelson
3. Olive Margaret LESSELS born 27 January 1903 Nelson
4. Vera Dollie LESSELS born 30 May 1904 Nelson
5. William Ronald LESSELS born 20 August 1905 Nelson
6. John Maurice LESSELS born 15 November 1906 Nelson
7. Keith LESSELS born 19 June 1908 Nelson
8. Malcolm Bevan LESSELS born 06 February 1910 Nelson
9. James Bertie (Jim) LESSELS born 11 September 1911 Nelson
10. Alec Neil LESSELS born 06 February 1917 Nelson
11. Rita Dorothy LESSELS born 09 April 1919 Nelson

The family history of
James Smith LESSELS and Bertha MANSSSEN

This is the story of about my grandmother, Bertha. It has been difficult to write, as she died long before I was born. When I began my research there were only three of her ten children still living. Two of these children were aged two months and seven years at the time of Bertha's death and could remember very little about their mother. The other, and oldest daughter had Alzheimer's and was in a home. My father, who lost his mother at seven years and father at 21 years, was now in his early eighties so he had to dig deep into his memory to help as best he could to tell her story.

Bertha MANSSSEN was born 09 April 1878 Stoke Suburban South Nelson NZ. Her parents were Emma Elizabeth formerly MARRIS age 25 born Sheffield York England and Charles Frederick MANSSSEN age 30 years born Nelson NZ occupation Labourer. John's parents were married 03 June 1874 Wellington NZ. E. E. MANSSSEN the mother of Stoke Suburban North registered the birth on 17 May 1878. The registrar was Robert PICKETT.

(Reference RGO NZ birth registration 1878 folio 1401line 136 Nelson district)

Bertha was born on 9th April 1878 at her parent's home in Stoke. Her mother E E Manssen, registered her birth on 17th May that same year. At the time of Bertha's birth her mother was 25 years old and her father 30 years old.

Bertha lived most of her younger years in Stoke and I believe she attended the Stokes School.

On the 1899 Nelson Electoral Roll Bertha was living in Milton Street and her occupation was recorded as Domestic Duties. It is believed that she was working at the Cawthorne Institute at the time.

James Smith Lessels was born on 11th April 1865 at North Road, West Kent Park, Sydenham, London, England. His parents were John Lessels an Architect and Margaret Lessels nee Gillies. He left home as a young man to travel the world. First he visited Africa, then Australia and finally arrived in Auckland, New Zealand. I have found no trace of when he came into the country, but I believe it to be about 1886. My father recalls his father telling him that he had seen the Pink and White Terraces, and they were destroyed in 1886. On one of his travels he also saw "Pelorus Jack", the legendary dolphin who used to guide ships across the Cook Strait.

James moved down the North Island, settled in New Plymouth and married his first wife Mary Ann Organ in 1895. The following year a daughter, Ivy Gillies Lessels, was born. When Ivy was only two years old her mother died of Typhoid Fever and was buried at Te Henui cemetery in New Plymouth. The burial plot has a concrete surround, but no headstone bearing Mary Ann Lessels name remains.

James gathered up Ivy and their belongings and moved to Nelson where they could be close to his late wife's parents Henry and Mary Organ. James lived in Brightwater with his in-laws and daughter for a short while. Then he moved to Christchurch where he became foreman for a large painting firm. Some members of the family remember being told James painted a church there. Ivy remained in the care of her grandparents, at Brightwater. James, or John as many called him, was sent back to Nelson to take care of the renovations for the Cathedral. While back in Nelson he met Bertha Manssen.

On 4th July 1900 at the Christian Meeting House on Waimea Road, Nelson, Bertha Manssen aged 22 years occupation Domestic Servant, married James Smith Lessels, aged 32 years occupation Painter. The witnesses at the wedding were John Hawksworth and Alice Edith Manssen, Bertha's older sister. Bertha was the first in her family to get married. On the marriage registration it read that Bertha's father was Charles a Carpenter.

Bertha and James first lived in Hardy Street East, where their first child Louis Alexander Lessels was born. About 1903 they moved to Milton Street where the remainder of their children were born. Bertha and James had 10 children, and along with Ivy, it made a total of 11 children.

All Nelson Electoral Rolls recorded them living in Milton Street, but gave no street number. Then in 1925 it read 33 Milton Street. James continued in his occupation as a painter and set up a family business, which continued until the retirement of his youngest son Alec.

My Father, Jim remembered his mother as a quite lady, who loved sewing and working with her hands.

During World War Two when James junior was in the port of New Plymouth he met an old gentleman who had remembered his father James when he was living in New Plymouth. He stated that James had a lovely singing voice and sang for many charitable concerts while living in New Plymouth with his first wife Mary Ann.

On many Sundays the family would walk to Toi Toi Valley to have dinner with Charles and Emma Manssen, Berth's parents. James and Charles enjoyed each other's company and often-played cards.

The years went quietly by, but in 1919 a tragedy struck the family. Bertha had not been well since the birth of her youngest child so Olive and Vera stayed home to help their mother. That morning as Bertha bathed the baby Rita, while Olive and Vera looked on. It was lovely to see their mother in such good sprits again. While Bertha was in ill health it had fallen upon the two oldest daughters to help look after Alec, aged four years, and Rita, now aged two months.

Bertha LESSELS formerly MANSSEN aged 41 years died on 05 June 1919 at the Public Hospital Nelson. Cause of death was "Verdict of Coroner Shock from Burns". Her parents were Emma Elizabeth nee MARRIS and Charles Frederick MANSSEN occupation Labourer. She was buried on 07 June 1919 at Nelson (Wakapuaka) cemetery by Church of England minister Rev Wm WOOLSTEIN. Bertha was born in Stoke Nelson and age 22 years she married James Smith LESSELS in Nelson. Her living issue were 7 males age 17, 13, 12, 10, 9, 7 & 2 years old and 3 females aged 16, 15 & 2 months. The informant was M A DONNELL the agent duly authorised in writing by Coroner, Police Station Nelson who registered the death on 09 June 1919. The registrar was S TYSON.

(Reference RGO NZ death registration 1919 folio 1464 line 67 Nelson district)

The children were put to bed, for their morning sleep while Olive, Vera and Bertha started to prepare the meals for the day. Olive went into the garden to get some vegetables while Vera helped her mother make a pudding. They needed some suet so Bertha said she would get some out of the laundry where it was kept. Bertha had been standing at the coal range when a spark fell onto her long dark skirt, where it remained unnoticed. Vera sat at the table mixing the pudding, awaiting her mother's return from the washhouse.

Bertha returning after a short while paused at the kitchen door and let out a mournful scream. Her skirt was on fire. Vera was looking at her mother as she stepped into the room. She grabbed a mat and started thrashing at the flames. In the garden, Olive heard the screams and ran back into the house. Bertha by this time had collapsed on the floor and Olive and Vera rolled the kitchen mats over her smothering the flames. Vera rushed out to fetch the neighbour, leaving Olive behind with her mother.

The neighbour arrived and instructed Vera to go and fetch the Doctor. Then Olive and the neighbour stripped all the burned clothes off Bertha and put her to bed. Bertha was murmuring incoherently and at times only her mouth moved with no words being uttered. The Doctor arrived some time later and after examining Bertha, he administered Vaseline to the burns. Then he made arrangements to have her transferred to the Nelson Hospital.

The local Policeman was called and he took down the details and then went to fetch Bertha's husband James, to inform him of the accident. James rushed straight to the Hospital to be with his wife.

Ivy LESSELS who was now a registered nurse is said to have been on duty at the time and helped to look after her stepmother. I had been told that although Bertha and Ivy had not got on in earlier years, in later years they became very close friends.

As James sat by Bertha's side she went in and out of consciousness, only managing to utter a few words to him. Bertha passed away later that afternoon, leaving behind her husband

James and 10 children. There was a coroner's inquest into her death and their verdict was, "Death by shock from burns accidental".

The Nelson Colonist newspaper read;

On 5 th June 1919 at Nelson Hospital of burns Bertha wife of J Lessels leaves husband and large family.
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Bertha was buried two days later at the Wakapuaka cemetery in Nelson.

James was now a widower for the second time in his life. But he now had the responsibility of bringing up the 10 children from his second marriage on his own, the youngest, Rita being only two months old. James's brother-in-law, Conrad Manssen and his wife, offered to look after the baby. Conrad and Emily had no children and the following year they adopted Rita. She brought them great joy and comfort. James always regretted letting Rita go but he could not work to feed his family as well as stay home to look after the baby.

James's brother William had arrived from England around 1910 and he took Vera to live with him in Murchison while she recovered from the shock of her mother's death. Olive went to stay with a lady as a domestic help.

James could have done with the girls help at the time, but he managed to bring up all those seven boys on his own. What a great father he proved to be in the years that followed.

At first he tried two housekeepers with no luck. One was very lazy and made the boys do all the work. One day James arrives home early and found her resting on the bed while the boys were busy doing her work. So he put it to the boys that they all try sharing the workload and make it on their own without a housekeeper and this is what happened.

In the beginning the boys went to a private school, which provided a hot meal in the middle of the day. This left James to prepare only a light meal at night. The boys went to Tasman Boys School and later the Boys Central School. Only three sons went to Nelson College.

I know very little about the girl's education but two, Ivy and Olive went on to become registered nurses.

A few of the children learnt to play music, and most of the boys learnt the trade of painting from their father. The majority of them ended up working in the family business. They grew up very close and they used to play, hunt and fish together. They were the Lessels gang.

The boys all had jobs to do around the house after school so they had little time to themselves compared to other children of the same age. James sent the boys to an Anglican Sunday School, which was held in a little church in Milton Street.

He continued to take the boys to their grandparents in Toi Toi Valley where they all had Sunday dinner together. They would walk all the way there and back. Some times Charles and Emma would have Sunday dinner with them all at their home in Milton Street. James and Charles continued playing cards together. When Charles and Emma moved to Halifax Street, Bertha's brothers, Frederick, Norman, Conrad and William Manssen, would join Charles and James in their card games.

James ran his painting and paperhanging business from his home. Often when he had to go and price a job he would load the boys on the horse and cart and take them along. If he ever

stopped at the hotel on the way for a glass of ale, he always bought the boys a glass of raspberry.

One day he went out to a farmer in Hira to price a job. As he got out of the cart he forgot to put the brake on. Something frightened the horse and it bolted with the boys hanging on tightly to the cart. The farmer had a new car so James and the farmer both jumped into it and followed the horse and cart. The horse, being a creature of habit, stopped at the next hotel it came to. James jumped out of the car rushed over to the cart and put the brake on. My father said he had never seen his father look so white. James was so pleased to see them all safe and sound he then bought all the boys the biggest glass of raspberry that he could.

In time the horse and cart was replaced by a Harley Davidson, then the good old Ford car came along.

The boys gave their father many a grey hair but also a lot of pleasure. The boys had heard of a circus trick where lots of people climbed onto a bike. So, boys being boys they took their father's bike and climbed aboard. The bike broke and they quietly took it to show their father. As they came around the corner James took off his hat and threw it on the ground and said "You boys will be the ruin of me". He had to go out and buy a new bike and he often said it was never good as the old one.

Keith also tried another circus trick, jumping off the shed roof with an umbrella, resulting in a broken arm. James had to pay for the arm to be put in plaster. In those days all medical and hospital costs had to be paid for by the parents.

My father James junior was hospitalised with diphtheria as a child, so things must have been very hard for James at times. When the influenza epidemic broke out not one of the boys caught it, apparently due to the fact that their father dosed them with a nip of the good stuff each night until the epidemic ended.

At the end of the First World War my father remembered watching one of his brothers ring out the bells at the old Wheelhouse Fire Station in the wood. It was quite an honour for the family and there was much festivity.

In the Depression, Lou, the oldest son, still managed to hold on to his Ford car and many a distant relative remembers him as he would take family members, cousins, uncles etc on trips to hunt and fish.

During the Depression the boys had to take what jobs they could. My father has many a tale to tell of the work camps and poor living conditions at some of the farms where he worked.

One by one the boys went into the painting business with their father, except William and James junior.

The only grandchild that James would have seen was Ivy's daughter Josephine THORN.

James Smith Lessels passed away from peritonitis in Nelson Hospital in 11th April 1934 at the age of 67 years. He was buried alongside his wife Bertha at the Wakapuaka Cemetery the following day. After his funeral my father said his grandmother Emma came up and sat down next to him and said, "How much more do you boys have to suffer". Dad was 22 years old at the time.

The boys continued to live in the family home. Their sister, Vera stayed with them until her marriage. James had taught the boys well, and they were capable around the house.

Just before Christmas one year my father decided to take down the curtains in the old family home and soaked them in the tub. When he returned to put them on the line, the curtains just fell apart like tissue paper. He had to pay a lady to make new curtains. His father had not taught the boys how to sew.

With World War II came more suffering. One brother Malcolm was killed in the War, and Alec was a Prisoner of War. But the War touched many families not just the Lessels family.

The family business was in the hands of the oldest son, Louis, when the Second World War broke out. As most of the boys enlisted, the family business closed down for a while and the government took the firms' Ford truck. After the War William and Jim, my father moved to Wellington but the rest of the boys stayed in Nelson and continued the family painting firm of J. Lessels & Sons.

Although my father had lived most of his life in male company, without a mother's influence, he had never spoken roughly and has always acted as a true gentleman.

Mr father James junior and I spent a short holiday together in Nelson in 1990 and shared many a happy memory while travelling around Nelson district. Together on a visit to Wakapuaka Cemetery, we paid our respects to Bertha (Manssen) and James Smith Lessels.

Berth and James LESSELS their children and descendants

1- Ivy Gillies LESSELS born 27 April 1896 New Plymouth NZ died 28 November 1929 Wellington NZ married 14 March 1923 Brightwater Nelson NZ Cecil Walter THORN born 18 March 1894 Appleby NZ died 10 July 1963 Christchurch Cecil Walter THORN married after the death of Ivy.

1-1- Female LESSELS

2- Louis Alexander LESSELS born 08 September 1901 Nelson died 19 June 1953 Nelson NZ married 19 March 1948 Nelson NZ Jessie Eileen LESSELS formerly HANSEN born 10 October 1913 Lower Hutt NZ

2-1 **Male LESSELS** and Female RIDDELL

2-1-1- Female LESSELS

2-1-2- Female LESSELS

3- Olive Margaret LESSELS born 27 January 1903 Nelson NZ died 07 August 1991 Nelson NZ 1st married 25 June 1925 Nelson NZ John (Jack) GARDNER born 15 March 1903 died 05 January 1943 Nelson NZ (1 Issue) 2nd married 29 March 1952 Nelson NZ Roy ANDREWS born 1907 died (no Issue)

3-1- **Alec John GARDINER** born 14 March 1933 Nelson NZ died 18 March 1933 Nelson NZ

4- Vera Dollie LESSELS born 30 May 1904 Nelson NZ died 03 July 1983 Auckland married 09 September 1935 Nelson NZ Charles MCCOMBIE born 1896 died (no Issue)

5- William Ronald LESSELS born 20 August 1905 Nelson NZ died 05 August 1951 Nelson NZ (never married)

6- John Maurice LESSELS born 15 November 1906 Nelson NZ died 28 July 1967 Nelson NZ (never married)

7- Keith LESSELS born 19 June 1908 Nelson NZ died 15 March 1984 Nelson NZ (never married)

8- Malcolm Bevan LESSELS born 06 February 1910 Nelson NZ died 01 October 1943 Pacific (killed in action world War Two) married Jessie Eileen HANSEN born 10 October 1913 Lower Hutt died 199? Ashhurst NZ

8-1- **Male LESSELS** and Female MERCER

8-1-1- Male LESSELS

8-1-2- Male LESSELS

8-1-3- Male LESSELS

8-1-4- Female LESSELS

9- James Bertie (Jim) LESSELS born 11 September 1911 Nelson NZ married 18 November 1941 Nelson NZ Doris HARRIS born 15 August 1915 Invercargill NZ died 12 June 1982 Upper Hutt NZ

9-1- **Male LESSELS** and Female CAMPABELL (2 issue) and Female TAWERA

9-1-1- Male LESSELS

9-1-1-1- Male LESSELS

9-1-2- Male LESSELS

9-2- **Female LESSELS**

9-3- **Female LESSELS** and Male YATES

9-3-1- Female YATES and Male THOMPSON (no Issue) and Male FURJES (1 Issue)

9-3-1-1- Female FURJES

9-3-2- Female YATES and Male REIHANA (2 Issue) and Male HUNT (1 Issue)

9-3-2-1- Male REIHANA

9-3-2-2- Female REIHANA

9-3-2-3- Male HUNT

9-3-3- Female YATES and Male TIMOTEO

9-3-3-1- Male TIMOTEO

9-3-3-2- Female TIMOTEO

9-3-3-3- Male TIMOTEO

9-3-3-4- Male TIMOEO

9-3-4- Female YATES and Male BELL

9-3-4-1- Male BELL

9-3-4-2- Male BELL

10- Alec Neil LESSELS born 06 February 1917 Nelson NZ died 09 January 1983 Nelson NZ
married 24 August 1940 Eketahuna NZ Annie (Doll) ROLLS born 05 September 1917
Alfredon NZ died 31 October 1990 Nelson NZ

10-1- **Male LESSELS** and Female ROBINSON

10-1-1- Female LESSELS and Male surname unknown

10-1-1-1- Noah surname unknown

10-1-1-2- Ruth surname unknown

10-1-2- Female LESSELS

10-1-3- Male LESSELS

10-2- **Female LESSELS** and Male SAVAGE

10-2-1- Female SAVAGE and Male GIBSON

10-2-1-1- Male GIBSON

11- Rita Dorothy LESSELS born 09 April 1919 Nelson NZ died 04 February 1999 Nelson
NZ Known as Rita Dorothy MANSSEN as she was adopted by her Uncle Conrad
MANSSEN