

Blender and Sunbeam Mixer donated by Janene Smith

Jane Groufsky¹, Janene Smith¹

¹ Auckland Museum, Auckland, New Zealand

Corresponding author: Jane Groufsky (papahou@aucklandmuseum.com)

Academic editor: Zoe Richardson ♦ Received 5 December 2024 ♦ Accepted 6 December 2024 ♦ Published 30 December 2024



Figure 1. Semak Vitamizer blender, 1950s, and Sunbeam Mixmaster cake mixer, 1950s. Gift of Janene Smith. Collection of Auckland War Memorial Museum Tāmaki Paenga Hira, 2023.43.1; 2023.43.2. © Auckland Museum CC BY.

On the 27th of January 2023, Auckland was hit by a period of intense rain which resulted in widespread and catastrophic flooding. Many Aucklanders were forced to evacuate their homes with little warning. Shortly after 9pm, rising floodwaters made Mt Eden resident Janene Smith leave her unit, taking with her just a small bag of essentials.

Smith returned the next day to begin the cleanup of the six-unit section she shared with her neighbours, forming a large pile of ruined possessions – fridges, beds, and paintings among them. However, two items that Smith held back from the rubbish were a blender and cake mixer. Both had been rendered inoperable after being submerged in knee-high floodwaters, yet held sentimental value due to their family history.

Five months later, in June 2023, Smith approached Auckland Museum to donate the blender and mixer to our Social History collection. While I had been keen to acquire objects which illustrated this significant event — and by extension the impact of climate change — it is difficult to approach potential donors while they are facing the physically and emotionally draining challenge of rebuilding their homes. Smith's offer was therefore a welcome and meaningful contribution. In addition to the objects, she provided photographs and a narrative of her experience, which we share here. Through these items and her story, we gain insight into the small but deeply personal impacts of climate-related disasters.

Jane Groufsky, Curator Social History

History of the blender and mixer

The Semak Vitamizer was bought by our grandfather Charles Smith, born in the late 1890s. Charlie migrated from Watford, England to Auckland, New Zealand as a young man and settled in Grey Lynn to raise his family with his wife Alice Beatrice. Both had come from very working-class backgrounds, had very little and worked very hard all their lives. Charlie was a merchant seaman, a Laundry Man and later a Stationer. He had a great passion for the horse races. Charlie learnt to cook in the Merchant Navy. We don't know when he bought this blender but think it was probably after his wife passed away in 1958. It was inherited by his son, our father, and then by me (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. A birthday party for one of the Smith children, with homemade baking made by Valerie Smith using her Sunbeam Mixmaster, early 1970s. Image courtesy of Janene Smith. © All rights reserved.

The Sunbeam Mixmaster was bought by our mother Valerie Smith in the 1960s. It was an expensive purchase at the time but was then used every weekend and sometimes more often to bake goods for the family, for special events and occasions and for neighbourhood events as well. Valerie was born in Onehunga in the 1930s and grew up in Onehunga/Penrose. After she married in the 1950s she and her husband settled in Mt Roskill to raise their family. Like many women of her era Valerie could turn her hand to just

about any craft. She was a spectacular baker and was often co-opted by neighbours to bake cakes for special events. Many a neighbourhood 21st and engagement cake was mixed in this mixer. Both of Valerie's daughters learnt to bake using this mixer. It was both forgiving of little hands, and also very sturdy and tough. Valerie was very particular about maintaining the motor and cleaning and storing the mixer. Consequently, although it shows signs of much use, the glass bowls are intact with only one chip on the rim of one of them. I always loved the beautiful opaque glass bowls. The mixer made a lovely heavy purring sound. It was the sound of home, of nourishment and comfort.

This mixer inspired my love of baking, which I made a career of in my younger years. It was always a graceful and meaningful object to me. I can't bear to just dispose of it and there is no-one to hand it on to. Both of these items were still in working order and use until the 27 January 2023 floods, when both were immersed in flood water. Now they are at the end of their working lives. The Vitamizer shows some staining from the flood.

The January 2023 flood

I took a photo from our front verge looking up our street towards Dominion Road, at 7.22pm on the night of the flood (Fig. 3). There is always a lot of ground water here when it rains heavily, but this was more than I'd seen before. A small lake had formed, and you could no longer see where our driveway met the road. The neighbour's verge was submerged. At this stage I still hoped we'd be okay. But this was nothing to what would come in the next one to two hours when the drains all overflowed at once and the water rushed down from the school. This portion of the road would turn into a rushing river and became impassable. I seem to remember that the next day there were a few cars stranded at odd angles along our end of the street. The caravan seen in the photo had to be towed away in the coming weeks; I haven't seen it since.

Sometime between 7.22 and 9pm the flood waters took over. It happened very quickly. Around 9.10pm on 27th January 2023 I left the house with a small bag of the essentials I could grab. Water was bubbling up from the wastewater pipe in the car port like it was a spring. The water came in through the back door first, then through both back and front doors, then up through the bath plughole. The water was knee-high through the house, over almost every power socket, through all the bottom drawers and cupboards, which, in the kitchen, is where the blender and cake mixer were. The bottom veg bins in the fridge filled with water; the bottom drawer of the oven filled with water. So, the incongruity of a tea towel hanging tidily over the filthy floodwater a few inches below. The irony of moving boxes stacked against a wall in case I needed to move house, now ruined by floodwater (Fig. 4). (In the coming weeks I would need moving boxes and they became very hard to find).



Figure 3. Mount Eden, 7.22pm, 27 January 2023. Image courtesy of Janene Smith. © All rights reserved.



Figure 4. Janene's flooded kitchen, around 9pm. Image courtesy of Janene Smith. © All rights reserved.

The carpet had billowed up in the lounge so that every step sent undulations across the room and anything that hadn't toppled into the water, threatened to with the slightest movement. I'd stacked everything I could onto every available surface area, and found there wasn't much of that. Luckily for us the water seemed to stop rising then, although at the time, I didn't know what might happen through the night. When I left then, I didn't know what I would find the next day.

There's a strange silence with the water. It soaks up all the usual sounds. There are no more car sounds, no footfalls, no percussive noise. It slows every movement. You try to hurry, but the water won't let you. Leaving that night, a blanket of watery silence had fallen over the flats, broken by small swishing sounds and in the distance, people shouting. It was strangely calm and very frightening.

The next day the water had all receded - where did it all go? The smell when the water receded was indescribable; it smelled strongly of sewage but also deeply bitter, chemical, fetid - just very wrong. The kind of smell your whole-body rejects. I thought the smell would never go and it took months. I still smell it on some things (Fig. 5).

The flood covered the garden and my first, beautiful crop of kūmara. I dug them out in May, and took a photo to witness their magnificence, then reluctantly put them in the compost. I don't know when the garden will be



Figure 5. Flood level on Janene's front door, 28 January 2023. Image courtesy of Janene Smith. © All rights reserved.

okay to plant in again. And the compost, is it usable? Is the soil ok? No-one seems to know.

Janene Smith, 2023



Figure 6. Kūmara dug up from the garden after the flood. Image courtesy of Janene Smith. © All rights reserved.