

My Recollections of Early Tuatapere

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MY RECOLLECTIONS OF EARLY TUATAPERE

(This article was written in 1952 by Mr Hugh McFeely, who was sole and head teacher at Tuatapere from 1910 to 1922)

It was on a cold winter's night in June, 1910, that I arrived by the eight o'clock train and was met at the station by Mr J. J. H. McLean, who was the chairman of the newly established school committee.

He took me to the hotel, no other place being available for me to board, and introduced me to Mr and Mrs W. D. West, proprietors of the newly built Waiiau Hotel. I soon found that there was no school building, but that I was to teach my small flock in the Cymric Hall, a large barn-like structure recently built by Mr John Davies.

On my first morning, on the comparatively short walk to my school I passed two noted bushmen, Austin Frawley and Mick O'Neill, hacking down the scrub and young trees on the roadside. They informed me that a footpath was to be made as soon as possible.

On entering what was to be Tuatapere's first seat of learning, I was struck by the chilly atmosphere of the place. There were no windows at all on what would have been the sunny side. There, however, the Education Board had provided a portable kerosene stove, and my 15 pupils and myself got as near as we possibly could to it.

The names of the first day pupils were: Albert Sneyd, Ivan Rask, Charles Rask, Redmond Fitzgerald, Eileen Fitzgerald, Netta Gray, Ruby Mills, James Howarth, Harry Howarth, Neta Purdue, Eva Sneyd, Minnie McLean, Walter McLean and Allan McLean. Of these first day pupils, Albert Sneyd (killed early in the First World War), Harry Howarth and Walter McLean are deceased.

The majority of the pupils were in the lower classes, and so continued at the school for some time. There was a billiard room attached to the hall, and the click of the billiard balls and men's voices kept accompaniment to the teacher's and pupils' voices. However, Mr Davies did all he possibly could to see that the school was not unduly disturbed.

After about a year the little Methodist Church was built and it was deemed advisable to shift the classes there, as there was more ground available for the children to play.

During this period I obtained a year's leave to study at the Otago University. My place was taken by an elderly retired teacher, Mr George Hassing.

FIRST ROOM

In April, 1913, mainly through the efforts of Mr J. C. Thomson MP for Wallace, the first room of the school was opened on the present site. It was a gala day in the little community, the school being officially opened by Mr Thomson in the presence of a good attendance of the public.

By this time the school roll was increasing rapidly and it was soon evident that another room would have to be built. An assistant was appointed as infant mistress. She was Miss Mary Irwin, of Lochiel.

The school ground was in a very rough state, only the area surrounding the school being cleared. In front was a swamp, and at the back the stumps of fallen trees. On my remarking to the then Commissioner of Crown Lands on the poor site, he said, "We are not going to pick out the eyes of the township for a School." The School Committee were men who were busy carving out homes for themselves, and so improvements were very slow.

In 1911 I was asked by the executive of the Southland Education Institution to read a paper on "The Difficulties of the Backblock Teacher." I wrote and read this paper at the annual meeting of teachers. The newspaper printed the report in full and deemed it worthy of a leading article. Much of what I advocated, although it appeared revolutionary at the time, has come to pass.

LARGER SCHOOL

The school now becoming overcrowded, a new room was built. Miss Sybil Wilson (Mrs George Printz) of Orepuki was appointed infant mistress in place of Miss Irwin. I left about this time to join the armed forces and was absent for two years, the school being in charge of a relieving teacher, a Mr McKenzie.

On my return, another assistant, Miss Katie Cameron was appointed, but on account of lack of accommodation, the Presbyterian Church Sunday School room was rented to take Miss Cameron and her classes.

In 1922 I felt that my work in Tuatapere was finished, and I took an appointment at Invercargill, and thence to the North Island in various schools for twenty-five years. It was heart break for me to leave Tuatapere, to sever a connection with a school that I had care of from its infancy. The people too, were over the years, very kind to me, and in return I did all I possibly could to promote the progress of the infant settlement.

The school committees were loyal and most helpful. Some of the chairmen I best remember were Messrs J. J. McLean, T. J. Fitzgerald and Charles Duncan. For their public spirit and unwearying interest in the school over the years, names such as Mesdames McDonald (Granny McDonald) and Curow the Rev S. J. Hill, and Tom Ward came vividly to my mind. Truly the good work they did lives after them.

SPECIAL OCCASIONS

We had our gala days at the school, the annual school concert, the break-up, the presentation of a flag and staff on the outbreak of the First World War, this ceremony being presided over by Mr John Findlay, member of the Education Board, and a public spirited farmer of Orawia. There was also the unveiling of the Sneyd Memorial in memory of the only pupil old enough to serve overseas. This ceremony was performed by his uncle, Mr A. Sneyd of Invercargill. Memorial trees were planted by the pupils in the Main Street in memory of fallen district soldiers. A great friend of the school was Mr J. C. Thomson, MP for Wallace, for 21 years and he attended numerous functions we held.

About 1920 the present teacher's residence was built, and I occupied it until 1922 when my successor, Mr George Higgins of the Orawia School was appointed.

(To be Continued.)

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Recollections Of Early Tuatapere

(This article was written in 1952 by Mr Hugh McFeely, who was sole and head teacher at Tuatapere from 1910 to 1922)

From West's Waiiau Hotel, the present shop nearest the hotel was occupied by Mr Tom Ward, bootmaker.

Part II The Township

There were no other buildings until we reached near the present National Bank of New Zealand. There Mr Stout occupied a new grocer's shop with a dwelling house nearby. Acting on behalf of Mr W. A. Gaffney, I afterwards sold this property to the late Mr Sandy Robertson for £150. Truly a bargain when we see the prices of today.

Passing along we come to the site of Cymric Hall (built by Mr John Davies) and afterwards burnt down. This hall was where Mr Bert Stancombes garage now is. There

were no further buildings until we reached Aitken and Young's butcher shop (where Mr Milne now is).

Across the creek on the left was Mr C. Sneyd's house and on the opposite corner was his shop, later to be called Charlton's store (and now Cameron and Finn). Coming further towards the school and near the store was a blacksmith's shop (Richards and McGearty). There was one house in Sneyd Street occupied by a family named Woolett.

These, with the railway houses and Mr McLearn's farm at the back of the railway houses, comprised the infant settlement. Just over the river on the right was the shack occupied by the ferryman, Mr C. Rask, and on the left the old hotel behind the present dairy factory. The Half Mile Road was dense bush to the edge of the road.

It was not long before there were changes in the business area. Mr George Charlton arrived, and took over Sneyd's shop and by his business ability made this store the leading business for many years. Mr W. A. Gaffney took over Stouts Grocery store, some years later leasing it to Adamson Bros. Mr T. J. Henderson had already purchased the butchery business of Messrs Aitken and Young. Jack Curry had a saddler's shop alongside Mr Tom Ward (bootmaker). Mr Jack Hinchcliff was early on the scene, and erected a shop and dwelling opposite Mr Charlton's store. This was a bakery business for many years. A boarding house was erected and this was taken over by Mr and Mrs James Rogers.

Cymric Hall and the billiard room were purchased by Mr Hugh Mason who was the first to inaugurate a taxi service. Mr Davies erected a billiard room near the hotel which afterwards passed into the hands of Mr Harry Lobb. As old photographs show, by 1920 the Main Street assumed much of the characteristics it has today. A dairy factory had been established early and this was managed by Mr Windleburn (1910).

After some years a pipe band was inaugurated and received strong support from all sections of the community. The band gave its services freely, and was in evidence at all gatherings held to promote the welfare of the district. The pipers I remember best were Sandy Robertson and the Dickson family.

For some years the only means of communication and transport was by the ferry or punt as we commonly called it. In these days of official closing of the hotels at 10 o'clock, there was often a wild rush to catch the last ferry. No doubt some of the laggards had made private arrangements with the ferryman to come for them at a given signal. Sometimes others were left lamenting and had to remain on this side of the river until early morning.

I was once told that Tuatapere means "standing and waving." Whether this is the true Maori meaning or only a skit on the punt waiters, I don't know.

Most of the large sawmills were on the Papatotara side and the river traffic was always fairly busy. I was sorry to see the river dump. More fitting would be a stately avenue of

trees along the track of the river – a path so often trod by those grand old pioneers of the Far West.

During one hot dry summer, about Christmas time, bush fires raged and the township was threatened with destruction. Everyone turned out to fight the flames, an unenviable task with a thick pall of smoke enveloping everything, and the hot atmosphere almost unbearable. Interest was aroused one day when the news spread that a wild pig had been captured on Half Mile Road.

The railway station was burnt down, and a new one on the same lines took its place. The first station master was Mr G. Mackley, afterwards General Manager of NZ Railways and later MP for Masterton. There was no post office, but mail was delivered at the railway station.

Later a post office was built near the hotel and this served for some years until the present post office was built. The old building was sold and removed.

There was a strong branch of the Southland Progress League with Mr Geo. Charlton as chairman, and Mr H. McFeely as secretary. Much work was done by the League in the initial stages of the Monowai electricity scheme to further it and bring it into operation. One of the leading movers in this was Mr A. W. Rodgers of Birchwood who was frequently in Tuatapere boosting the scheme along.

The Domain, commonly known as Ryan's Island, after a half caste who squatted there, was improved and the annual athletic sports meeting was held there.

SAWMILLING IN THE WEST

The sawmilling industry has passed through many ups and downs in Southland. Naturally in the March of progress, conditions of working, transport and modern machinery have revolutionised the industry.

As the railway pressed on to Tuatapere, sawmilling gained momentum, and with mills first at Waihoaka and on to Te Wae Wae, the Southland Sawmilling Company and the Austin Mills began operations. The Southland Sawmilling Company was to loom largely in the sawmilling world of the Waiau for many years, the principals in the firm being Messrs W. Guthrie and W. Brent. Mills were also established at Te Tua, the chief of which were those of Peter Hamilton and Company.

With the arrival of the railway to the banks of the Waiau, sawmilling received a great impetus. The Southland Sawmilling Company had four mills adjacent to Tuatapere, Hamilton and Co. two and Lance Raymond one. The timber was mostly red pine but totara and white pine were also milled. The native beech had not then come into its own.

Noted bushmen of the early days were the Bone Bros, J. Clayton, Jack Pont, M. O'Neill, W. Norman, M. Cash, M. Bennett, O'Rourke and the Frawley Bros. A number of these

axemen were Tasmanians and some of them had no peer in New Zealand in the wielding of the axe. A well-known and popular figure in the industry for many years was Mr M. Dowling who was the pioneer in the many sports fixtures in which figured the axe and the saw.

The timber from the Papatotara side of the river was carted by horse wagons and crossed the Waiau River by punt at the railhead. Although the sawmills have pushed into the back country, some 30 miles from the railhead, modern transport and good roads have made it comparatively easy to get the timber to market today. Last year (1951) 10½ million feet of timber was reailed from Tuatapere.

Probably the great romance of the timber industry in the west was the establishing of the largest mill in New Zealand at Port Craig (Mussel Beach), some 25 miles from Tuatapere, and on the coast of Te Wae Wae Bay.

The leading spirit in this venture was a director of the Marlborough Timber Company, Mr Dan Reece, of Christchurch, and one of New Zealand's greatest cricketers. An area of 4000 acres with a frontage on the sea was taken up; this included some magnificent stands of red pine. After leaving Bluecliffs one entered the primeval forest with its potential wealth. A never-to-be-forgotten sight was the row on row of stately rimus like the vast pillars of some great cathedral, but seeming to stretch unendingly. This was how the writer saw it in 1916.

Of the bush country itself Mr Reece writes: "It proved to be an enormous area of bush that ran back into the hills, along the coast to Sand Hill Point, about five miles to the south, and from there in a westerly direction beyond the Wairaurahiri River towards Preservation Inlet. Lake Hauroko, more than twenty miles long, the source of this fast flowing river lies some 25 miles inland and as the best tracts of mixed bush covered extensive milling areas on both sides of the river and around the lake, the amount of timber may be imagined. It was estimated that there was more than 500 million feet of mill-able timber."

A small mill was built at Port Craig for sawing the timber for the building of the big mill and for houses, stores and huts, as well as for a dance hall and billiards room.

Just as the small mill was ready to get steam up, a tragedy occurred in which John Craig, the manager (after whom Port Crag was named) and Fred Parry were drowned at the mouth of the Waikoau. In less than a year, John Craig's brother was caught in an explosion in the bush and died a few days later. The loss of these capable men was a cruel blow for the company.

The machinery for the new mill arrived from America and at last the new mill arrived and was erected. Messrs Sims, Cooper and Co and Sir Robert Anderson joined the company and brought much needed financial help. A wharf was built and soon coastal steamers were loading the timber for northern markets. The output climbed to three quarters of a million feet of timber a month, the record being 729,000 feet in May 1928.

This was the largest output of any sawmill in New Zealand.

The future looked very bright for the Company, but without warning came the economic blizzard and the depression which lasted for some years. The price of timber fell and fell, and the Port Craig mill was doomed. It was a great venture and had it struck prosperous times would have made a fortune for its promoters.

The road keeps forging ahead beyond the town of Tuatapere. Some day it will reach these forest areas where a dozen small mills, transporting the timber by lorries, will play the part that one great mill under more favourable circumstances might have played. (To be Continued.)

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Recollections Of Early Tuatapere

Recollections of Early Tuatapere. (By Hugh McFeely.) Part 3.

PART 3

Being a somewhat isolated community, the people had to depend on themselves for their amusements. Of course dancing loomed largely, and the sawmillers', spinsters' and the bachelors ball were events of the year.

One of the biggest functions was a complimentary social and dinner in 1911 held in honour of Mr J. C. Thomson MP. A large marquee was erected near the hotel, and Mrs West as caterer did herself proud.

Late on, a banquet was held in the Cymric Hall to celebrate the opening of the bridge. This was probably Tuatapere's greatest day, and folk came from far and near. The ribbon was cut by Mrs Hugh Erskine (Papatotara), the pioneer woman of the district.

Among the guests were the MP's of Wallace and Invercargill, The Minister of Finance, Sir Joseph Ward, was unable to attend but sent a warm message of congratulation.

Prior to the First World War a strong dramatic club organised by the young people came into existence, and three-act plays were staged with scenery and all complete. The plays drew crowded houses.

There was also a flourishing social club at Te Wae Wae, which had its full measure of support from Tuatapere.

ATHLETICS

The first athletic sports were held on the high ground newar the river (McLeods), and that noted bush worker, Mr M. Dowling, by his untiring and efficient service as secretary, put Tuatapere sports on the map.

Even in those days Rugby football was flourishing. Te Wae Wae fielded a senior team, as did Orawia and Tuatapere young men had the choice of playing for either team. The sub-union headquarters was at Riverton, and I remember on one occasion getting an SOS from the president (Mr Albert Ward, of Riverton) to attend a special meeting at Otautau. Business: To shift the headquarters of the union to Otautau. Every vote was needed to retain Riverton.

As there was no other means of reaching Otautau, I set out on a push bike. Chains of road had been newly metalled and the going was tough. It took me four hours to reach Otautau. Riverton remained the centre on the casting vote of the chairman.

In those far-off days there were no cliques, and we were all a happy united family.

The more important dances continued until daylight, and those who made the journey from Orepuki were able to catch the morning train which left at 5.40 am. The district was fortunate in possessing a number of capable musicians, probably the best known being Jack Carroll, Mr and Mrs Jack Pont, Wattie Hannan, Miss Fitzmaurice (Mrs McFeely), Bob Butler, Miss Young (now Mrs Stacy Walker), Miss Harrington (now Mrs A. L. Adamson, Invercargill) Austin and Tom McInerney, Mr and Mrs Bob Love (Orepuki, parents of the present proprietors of the Waiau Hotel) also gave much appreciated service as musicians at the dances over the years.

THE CHURCHES

In planning the township, those responsible did not set aside any land for the building of churches. Many of the best sections were bought and held by absentees who were in hopes of getting high prices. This greatly retarded the progress of Tuatapere.

About 1911, a home missionary, Mr S. J. Campbell (an Australian) arrived to take charge of the Methodist folk. He cleared the section and built himself a little church which still stands. I was deputed to write an account of the opening for the newspapers. There was a full church and the official opening was performed by the Rev Mr Fairclough, of Dunedin.

The leading church members were the McLearn family, the Harrison family (who arrived from Kaiapoi 1913), Misses Pearce and Tomlinson (now Mrs Robert Scott) and Mr Pearce (father of Mr N. Pearce, of the present school staff).

Mr Campbell afterwards joined the Congregational Church and had charge of churches in Wellington and Auckland. I met him many years later in Auckland. Home missionaries

came and went, among the early ones Mr Dennis, who is now a minister in Taranaki. None of these men were married and bached in a room behind the church.

The Presbyterian Church held services in the Cymric Hall, the first home missionary being Mr R. D. McEwan, who was still in charge when the present brick church was built. Succeeding him came the Rev Mr Hill, only a few years out from Scotland.

Mr Hill was an ideal clergyman tolerant and kindly. He was greatly respected by the whole community. When he was leaving Tuatapere, those not of his denomination opened a subscription list, and a good sum of money was raised. A deputation consisting of Messrs C. Williams, C. Chamberlain and myself went to the manse where I made the presentation on behalf of the public of Tuatapere.

The flock of the Anglican Church was looked after by the Rev Mr Parata, who made periodic visits from Riverton. He was a dignified and cultured man and had inherited the great speaking qualities of the Maori race. A church was ultimately built near the school.

The Catholics had as their pastor the Rev P. Murphy, who also made visits from Riverton. The church at Te Wae Wae (now at Orawia) served the people of the district for many years. Nevertheless separate services were sometimes held at Tuatapere.

THE RESIDENTS

Many of the people I knew in the first ten years of the township's history have now passed away, others are scattered far and wide. I have met some of them in Wellington and Auckland. Others are in Australia and even as far away as London.

Besides the names I have already mentioned, familiar figures outside the confines of the township were the Erskines, the Normans, the Bennets of Papatotara, the parents of the Whytes and Scotts, and James King, Carnegy Gardner of Clifden, the Findays and Chamberlains of Orawia.

There were also Mr John Horrell of Te Tua, member of the County Council and other local bodies; Chas Ward; and my old friend Donald McKay of Happy Valley; the brothers McInerney and the Forde family; tall John Griffen of Te Wae Wae, whose home was the essence of hospitality; the Knowlers, the O'Briens, the Flanagans and Corkerys.

Most of these were very early settlers, Mr John Griffen 60 years ago taking up the land which his sons now farm. The Stucks (Mrs Grey was one of them) were also settlers near the township.

The only people I can remember being in Tuatapere when I arrived and who are still here are Messrs Davies, Lascelles, C. Williams. Mr John Mangan was here very early too. The Most prominent public men of the district with Tuatapere as its centre were Messrs John Horrell (Te Tua), John Findly (Orawia) and James King (Clifden). These men worked hard in the interests of the district and their names should not be forgotten.

OLD RESIDENTS

Tuatapere, too, had its full share of “characters,” and these lent colour to the social life of the district. “Dido” Nickless, as hard as nails, who thought nothing of swimming the Waiau. I well remember on one occasion finding his clothes parked on the river bank near the ferry. The mighty Waiau was bank to bank and it seemed impossible for one to survive in those swirling waters. I gave the alarm. The clothes were identified and a search party was organised; but “Dido” was found safe and sound half a mile down on the other side of the river. Needless to say he had been making one of his prolonged visits to the hotel.

Matty Fleming with his keen Irish wit was another local character, and to “put one across” Matty you had to get up early in the morning.

Jimmy Rogers, with his quaint sayings which were repeated by amused listeners many miles from Tuatapere and which still raise a laugh from the old timers, was a most original character.

Malcolm McDonald had a soft Highland accent and was witty and carefree. There were quite a few others who varied the monotony of the daily round with their quips and amusing sayings.

This brief sketch ends my story of the very young Tuatapere. I am glad I was privileged to share in its making and my first years here were among the happiest of my life. It taught me these lessons: that to get the most out of life, be useful where you live; and that man cannot live for himself alone.

Tuatapere, 1952.