

Opoki December 29, 1961

Steamer From Ohiwā

Take the passenger steamer from Ohiwā to Auckland, because it was three times as fast as going overland? Not today, but 59 years ago the Northern Steamship Company ran a regular service between the two ports, charging £2 10/- return.

Today there is no wharf at Ohiwā, and anyway, Auckland is only four hours away by fast car over tar-sealed highways. But 59 years ago, when Mrs E. D. Du Pontet of Waitohi Beach travelled to Auckland on social occasions, this steamer was the only practical way to go.

"The journey took 19 hours if we went direct, and 24 hours if we called into Tauranga," she told me this week.

And she remembered, as clear as a bell, steamers like the old Waitohi, the Ngaitawa and the Mangapapa, and Captains Hopkins, and Keatey and Faulkner, who used to command them.

Today the land on which the Ohiwā wharf, and the hotel, and the 20-acre horse paddock stood is a bare, tide-washed extension of the Ohiwā sandspit just inside the eastern harbour entrance. There is no indication that it was once a bustling coastal seaport, the focal point of passenger and goods traffic.

FERRY

When the Northern company steamers called a ferry boat also plied across the entrance, because that was also the coastal stage-coach route.

Mrs Du Pontet remembers having to ride her horse, or travel by buggy along the beach from the Waitohi River mouth to Ohiwā, because the hill road had then yet to be put through.

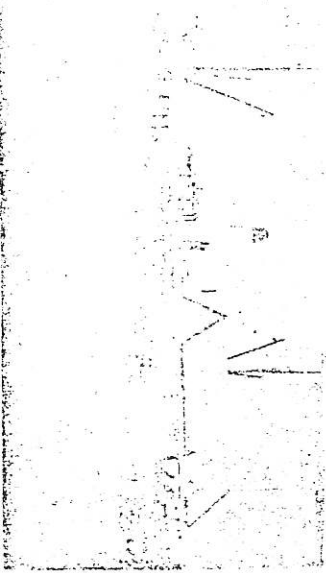
To travel by stage coach and rail to Auckland from Waitohi in those days, she said, was a three-day journey. By comparison the steamer was swift and comfortable — provided no storms were encountered.

The Waitohi was the most seaworthy steamer, Mrs Du Pontet recalled. Both the Ngaitawa and the Mangapapa had been Australian river boats, and tended to roll horribly in storms.

GOOD FOOD

At first Mrs Du Pontet was not much a sailor, but she soon found her sea-legs. Then, with the tang of salt, whether her appetite, she looked forward to the excellent meals the Northern company cooks and stewards served in the saloons.

She made several trips to Auckland from Ohiwā, after her parents, Mr and Mrs James Wood, arrived in 1902 to take up a Waitohi property. Mrs Du Pontet, who was born in Wellington in 1892, was then aged 10.



The Northern Steam Ship Company's Ngaitawa at the Ohiwā Wharf in the days when Mrs Du Pontet travelled to Auckland in her.

She sailed with Captain Hopkins in the Waitohi, and with Captain Keatey, who was mate in the Waitohi before he became master in the Ngaitawa. Sometimes she was invited onto the bridge for a better view of the exciting crossing of the Ohiwā bar.

STRANDED

The ships did not always make it across the bars, said Mrs Du Pontet. She recalled that the Ngaitawa was stranded frequently on the Opotiki bar — and refloated equally frequently, and apparently undamaged, on the next high tide.

She made her last steamer visit to Auckland in 1920, to meet her brother on his return for the first world war. That same year the Ohiwā wharf, weakened by the scouring of its piles, was dismantled.

Pressure from farmers for the continuation of a shipping freight service resulted in the construction of the Kutarere Wharf in 1922, with a joint loan raised by the Opotiki and Whakatake County Councils.

The pushing through of the east coast main trunk railway to Taneatua five years later dealt the Kutarere coastal service a blow from which it never really recovered. Closing-down of the Cheddar Valley, Nukunou and Waitohi dairy factories resulted in the Northern company coxwys only calling at Kutarere when they could not work the Opotiki bar.

Intermittent cargoes were handled at the Kutarere wharf until 1959, when the Waitohi left in October that year with its last load of butter.

FINALLY PAID

But it was not until 1961 that the two county councils made their last payment to complete the loan with which the wharf was built. Shipping had not quite finished with the Ohiwā wharf, however.

against nature. The bogy which once made the Ohiwā harbour a centre of commerce and traffic, inadequate and inefficient roads, had been overcome.

ONLY MEMORIES

Only Mrs Du Pontet, sitting in the sunshine outside her Waitohi beach home and a few others, can remember when the Waitohi's warning hoover meant that the gangway was about to be pulled up from the Ohiwā wharf, that Captain Hopkins was about to order the lines cast off and that another exciting voyage to Auckland would begin with the first turn of the Waitohi's propeller.

Convinced that Whakatake Board Mills experts justified a local coastal wharf, the Whakatake Harbour Board built a new wharf at the Ohope end of the harbour. The wharf was opened in 1960 and the Northern company coxwys like the Maranui, Moanui, Poranui, Maungani and Tawanui called there for a few years, loading board mills exports and some other local produce, and discharging a little general cargo, until eventually the Ohiwā bar became so unpredictable that trade also ceased.

LEISURE PLACE

Today, the beautiful Ohiwā harbour is a place for the activities of leisure time, rather than commerce. Where the Ohiwā wharf and hotel stood, the scapulis hunt for shellfish. At the rotting Kutarere wharf, where one has to be careful of ones footing, the local people fish, and a commercial fisherman ties his boat up occasionally.

At Port Ohope, the modern wharf facility stands deserted, a monument to the futility of mans' efforts matched

The wharf at Kutarere, timbers now broken and rotting, replaced the old Ohiwā Wharf, which once stood at the top left of the photograph.