

# The Waioeke Gorge

## Pre-European History

For most of its period of human occupation, the Waioeke Gorge has been occupied by the Ngati-Ira (a sub-tribe of the Whakatohea) who controlled the entire Waioeke catchment as far south as the Tataweka stream.

Fifteen pa sites have been recorded in the Waioeke Gorge area, with concentrations at Matahanea and Wairata.

One interesting site was found by Gordon Mead at Wairata in the 1950's. Situated on a small, almost inaccessible ridge beside a large slip, this small pa was probably used by hunting parties while catching the mutton birds nesting on the slip. Although the birds have not been seen there in recent times, they were recorded as being present by Buller, in his 'Birds of New Zealand' (published in 1888).

During 1823, a Ngapuhi force (from North Auckland) raiding the Bay of Plenty, moved up the Waioeke Valley, finally defeating the Ngati-Ira in the Tahora area before returning north.

In the 1830's the Ngati-Ira joined the widespread movement of inland tribes to the coast and the opportunities for trade that existed there. After fighting in the Opotiki area in 1865 (the Volkner Campaign), the Ngati-Ira retreated back into the Waioeke. Their chief, Hira-te-Popo, was a strong supporter of the Maori King movement and had refused to make peace with the Government when the other hapus of the Whakatohea laid down their arms in 1866.

Te Kooti Rikirangi, after his defeat at Ngatapa (near Gisborne) in January 1869, retreated into the Waioeke area, first to Te Wera, and then to a kaianga at Maraetahi (now called Oponae) that was built for him. This kaianga consisted of 31 whares, a house for Te Kooti, and a large whare karakia (prayer house), with extensive gardens. In 1879, following a raid on Opape by Te Kooti, two columns of Government troops set off to capture him. Wanganui and Whakatane Maoris under Major Kemp moved up the Tutaetoko and into the Omaukoro, attacking and capturing the four Wairata villages on the morning of March 25th, 1870. The other column, of Ngati-Porou warriors under Major Ropata, moved straight up the Waioeke River, attacking the Maraetahi kaianga on March 25th. Although the kaianga was captured, Te Kooti and most of his men escaped into the forest.

Later reports indicated that Te Kooti was staying with Hira-te-Popo at Tahora, but government troops sent

after him were unable to reach him through the flooded rivers. At the end of June, Hira-te-Popo and his people emerged to surrender to the Government and movement to the coast began once again. By the time the first settlers arrived to take up their blocks in the early 1900's, only a few Maoris were left, living on the flats around the Tauranga river mouth.

The confiscation line, north of which the government confiscated the Ngati-Ira land, runs about a mile south of Matahanea.

## The Early Settlers

In 1906, the intention to ballot most of the land in the Waioeke Gorge was advertised, land north of the confiscation line at Matahanea having been occupied earlier. There was a keen interest in the area from land-hungry settlers, and the blocks were rapidly taken up. In 1907, some 400 applications seem to have been made for a 700 acre block across the river at Oponae, and somewhere around 100 for each section in the Wairata area. The demand for land remained high and pressure from settlers resulted in the last eleven sections in the Opato and Manganuku Valleys being offered in 1911. Seven of these were taken up, the other four having access problems.

Gangs of bushmen were contracted to clear the land, often a dangerous occupation on the steep hills. Deaths and serious injury were not uncommon among the bushmen. Often the gangs would leave their camps and tools where they finished, just packing a few possessions and collecting their pay before they moved on.

Fencing wire and grass seed were packed in, fences being built of whatever suitable timber was available - mainly totara, red 'birch', and rimu.

One notable incident in those early days was the disappearance of a settler, Mr Crosswell, from Okioire. He disappeared while pighunting about 1909 and, despite a three week search, was never seen again.

## The Problem of Access

Initially, access to the area was difficult. Sections high up the valley were advertised as being 23 miles from Opotiki by dray road and pack track, balance 'swag track up the bed of stream'.

There was no access from the Gisborne side, the land being mainly unexplored. A route was deemed necessary, however, as there were few sheep in the Bay of Plenty at that time and most would have to come from Gisborne. In 1908 a rough track was blazed down the Opato and, after 1909, was used by all mobs travelling from Poverty Bay to

the Waioeka.

By the end of the First World War, a dray road had reached Oponae from Matahanea, a pack road ran from there through to Matawai. The smaller county roads were maintained by the settlers themselves, who were paid by the council for their work.

The first car was brought into the area by Mr Reuben Watson about 1918. It was a Model T Ford and Mr Watson is reported to have used it to carry his wool to Opotiki.

#### Houses and Stores

The first houses were rough wharves of pitsawn slabbing or corrugated iron, but these were soon replaced by larger two-room structures, built from timber packed up the Gorge.

All furniture had to be packed in from the end of the dray road. Mrs McPae even packed a piano into their Wairata homestead in the 1930's.

An Accommodation House, Store, and Post Office was established at Matahanea as soon as development began and a pack team operated from there.

Mr and Mrs Eaton opened a Store at Oponae about 1912. This was taken over by Mr and Mrs Anderson in October 1916 and Mr Anderson was later appointed Postmaster, a job which, initially at least, had no wage. When the Andersons left in 1929, the store was closed down.

#### World War I

The Waioeka Gorge area lost its share of young men during the First World War. On 15th September 1914, Mr G. Joblin, who lived at the mouth of the Gorge, noted "Fourteen young men, all in absolute pink of physical condition had ridden down from the Waioeka Gorge to Opotiki. They were going to the war. They were in great spirits and reckoned they were going for a big holiday. They had left the bushfelling and the fencing."

The Carlyle brothers, George Comer, the Greenwood brothers, Texas Richardson, the Traiford brothers, all went off. Only Jack Carlyle and Alick Traiford returned.

#### Farming the Land

For many years, wool was the main export from the area. Until 1929-30, all Oponae wool was packed to McLean's woolshed and baled there. The bales of wool from Wairata were packed to Oponae - three bales on each horse, before being loaded onto wagons. In the 1930's when the road improved, trucks replaced the packhorses.

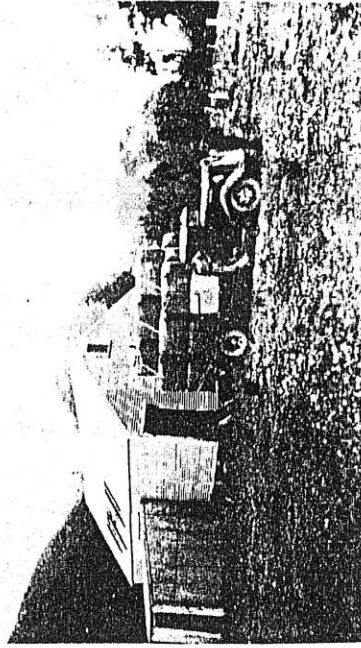
The s.w.e stock from the district supplied markets in Auckland and the Waikato. The local farmers drove their stock to the sales in Opotiki up until trucking began in the early 1960's. It was a three or four day drive from Wairata to Opotiki, with the mobs often stopping in the middle of each day to avoid heavy traffic.

The dependence on the value of the wool produced was brought home to the settlers in the Depression of the 1930's, when the value dropped until a bale of wool was worth no more than 1/6d (15 cents). The store stock values dropped also. Alan Chilcott, in the Opato Valley, used to store his wool when prices were low, filling his woolshed and, if necessary, his small two-roomed house too.

Most settlers had large orchards. Small areas of maize were grown to provide food for the horses.

In the 1930's and 1940's, most settlers milked a few cows and sent the cream off to Opotiki, the cream truck picking the cream up three times a week. Drivers of that truck (owned by Rip Reece) included Ernie Reece, Arthur Beets and Alick Traiford. Alick Traiford also had a butcher's business in Opotiki at one time, killing the meat at his home at the top of the Gorge, and running a butcher's van into Opotiki each day.

Rip Reece's lorry brought mail and stores every Saturday, and carted most of the wool out of the area.



Rip Reece's truck collecting wool from Gellert's woolshed, Wairata, 1930's.