

Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

Percy Bysshe Shelley

Derelict House Was Home For Pioneers

The 67-year-old boarding house once rang with the laughter of hundreds of pioneers.

But its four walls now stand hollow ... a relic of the past.

The house stands rotting, abandoned, unwanted, just over the bridge at Douglas, a few miles from Stratford on the Stratford-Taumarunui highway.

The Douglas boarding house, as it was known, was built by Arthur Walter, a farmer in the district, in 1906.

He decided that people passing through on their way to Stratford needed somewhere to break their journey.

At this time most of the Central Taranaki district was covered in heavy rain forest and sawmills were set up to aid in clearing the land.

The area was opened up when the railway was laid from Stratford to Douglas in 1905.

People from all the surrounding areas — such as Whangamomona, Tututawa, Makuri and Tabora — would travel to Douglas to catch the train to Stratford.

The boarding house enabled them to break their journey and the adjoining stables housed their horses until they returned from Stratford.

Wasps in the bath, peeling wall paper and broken windows framed by rotten curtains, create a desolate atmosphere at the old Douglas boarding house.

The boarding house soon became very popular and a billiard hall, containing two tables, was built beside it.

Six years after building the boarding house, the Walter family bought a farm in Waikato and leased the boarding house.

For £2 a week Mr and Mrs Alfred Needham rented the

The bachelors in the district would come for meals, casting them one shilling a time.

A week's board, with meals, washing, ironing and mending included, cost £1 a week.

During a sale day at Douglas, Mrs Needham

cream, trifles, fruit salad to eat.

So a £1 bet was laid that Snowy Needham, one of the sons, and Jack Walter could not eat all the dessert.

Mr A. L. Herdman, New Plymouth, city councillor, who was visiting Douglas that weekend from Tutu-

house, with Mrs Needham taking on the task of being mother to all the men.

She supplied them all with a collar and tie on Sunday and accompanied them to church.

But the Needham's had little time to stop and enjoy themselves.

The day in the boarding house would begin at 3 a.m. when drovers stayed the night.

Breakfast was ready soon after and often lunches had to be cut.

Black leading of the two stoves was the next chore after which the baking was done — and it usually took all afternoon to fill the cake tins.

Water had to be pumped to the second storey of the building so that the tired and dirty men could have baths when they returned.

White starched tablecloths for each table had to be laundered and the ironing had to be done every day.

This stove once cooked thousands of meals for merry travellers.



The decaying shell of the once busy boarding house at Douglas.

In the evenings, though, the workers relaxed, either with a sing-song around the piano, picked up at a Stratford mart for £5, or a game of poker in the "commercial room" with a few bottles of beer.

Mrs Needham would not allow beer in any other part of the house, and this was

usually strictly adhered to.

But one night, old Bill Newman, an odd job man, who lived in a bach behind the building and who always told tales of a lurid past and was seldom seen without "bow-yangs" below the knees of his pants, broke the rule.

He had made a trip to the pub in Toko and brought back a dozen bottles of beer.

Mrs Needham came in to find him on his back on the bed, cast like a sheep, after having "one too many."

She asked old Bill if he had any beer in the room.

"No, Mrs Needham," he said.

But she did not believe him, and bending down, she found the dozen under the bed.

Without a word she took two of the bottles and went outside. Holding them apart she crashed them together, while Bill Needham lay helpless with tears pouring down his face.

FIRE

She repeated the act until the dozen disappeared.

The boarding house escaped possible destruction by fire twice.

Mrs Needham was in the middle of spring-cleaning one day when she threw an empty ragwort spray tin into the fire.

The explosion blew the door off the copper but the fire was extinguished before too much damage was done.

The second near catastrophe occurred when one of the Needham girls was reading in bed, using a candle to light the book.

HOSPITAL

She fell asleep and the candle burned its way through the dressing table.

Again, the fire was put out before too much damage was done.

During the influenza epidemic of 1918 the boarding house became a hospital.

The first people to be af-

flicted were a gang of shearers. They had travelled as far as the boarding house on their way to Stratford.

All the beds were put in the dining room and one by one they were filled and refilled.

Mrs Needham and her eldest daughter, Lelia, nursed the sick until Lelia collapsed.

CHEESE

It is said she awoke after sleeping for 48 hours to find her hair had turned grey at the age of 18.

Finally Mrs Needham collapsed after caring for the sick for six weeks — but no-one died in the makeshift hospital.

The only people in the district who did not get the 'flu

in its heyday in the 1920's, the Douglas boarding house attracted guests from all over the district.

were those who locked and barred their gates and never moved from the house.

During World War II New Zealand had to make as much cheese as possible and the Stratford Dairy Company bought the old boarding-house for £300 to house some of its staff.

The company converted it into three self-contained flats and installed sewerage and water.

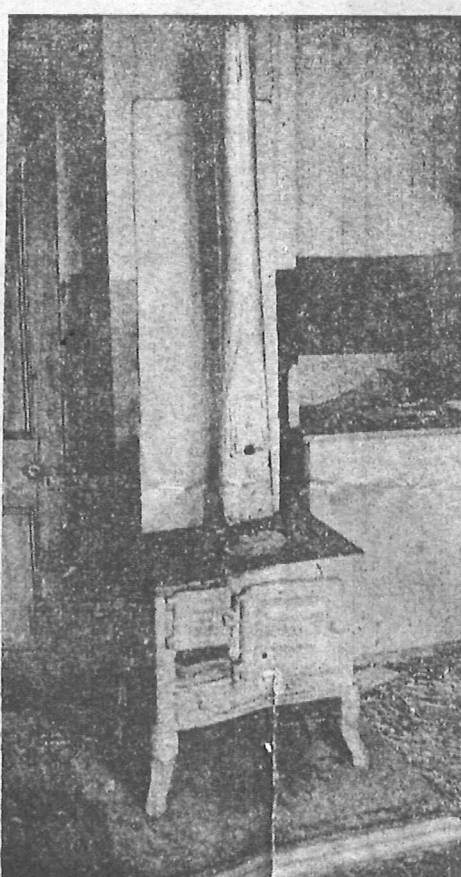
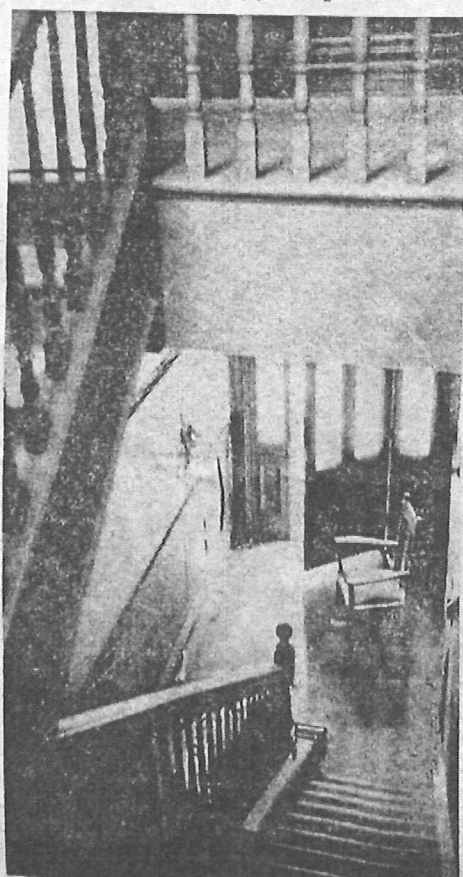
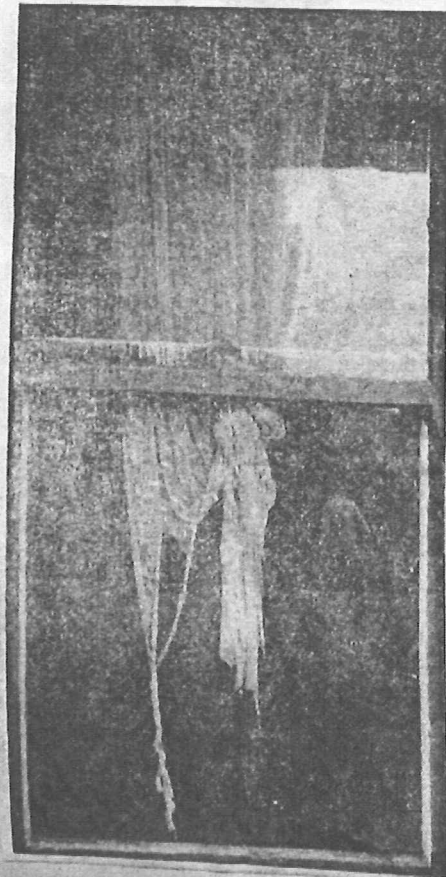
Twenty-five years ago the building was sold to the Douglas Brick and Field Tiles company, also for staff accommodation.

Today, the brick company brings its staff out from Stratford each day and has no further use for the flats.

The last people lived in the boarding house in 1965 and since then the building has been left to decay. So it stands today, neglected and forlorn, a closed chapter in Taranaki's past.



Mrs Mary Needham, who was "mother to them all", stands proudly in her garden outside the Douglas boarding house.



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