

UNEARTHING MYSTERIES OF KORU

How many people lie buried on top of a ridge several chains south of Koru Road, Omata, just past the Koru Hall, and how far the first New Zealand monastery extended on land on the other side of the road, are questions to which the Taranaki Regional Committee of the National Historic Places Trust has given increasing thought in recent years.

The painstaking research will be taken a step further with an on-the-spot investigation during a field day tomorrow.

In a recent letter the director of the Marist Catholic Maori Mission at Highden, the Rev. Father P. J. Cleary S.M., a member of the order to which the monastery founder, Father (later Dean) Louis Rolland S.M., belonged, asked if a monument could be erected to commemorate the only lay Marist religious, Brother Elias Regis, who is known to have been buried on top of the steep slope.

The committee plans to find how many more graves lie near the same spot. Of the death of Brother Elias Regis there is no doubt. His official death certificate gives his original name as Francis Regis Marin and shows that he died at Koru Monastery on May 30, 1872, three days before Wellington's first bishop, Dr Philip Vaird S.M., also died. He was popularly known as Brother Ely.

Two other names are known with reasonable certainty — Costello and McDavitt — but there is evidence to suggest there may be eight or nine bodies interred on the site. It is so close to the ancient Koru Pa, the subject of raiding parties early in the 19th century, that the area could also have been used for Maori burials.

Using spears and digging gently to ascertain where the soil has been disturbed beneath the ploughs which have passed over it in recent years, members of the committee hope to establish more definitely the location of the graves. They know from people who have lived on the property, now part of the farm of Mr J. M. Payne, who welcomes the investigation, approximately where graves exist. There are still people living, including members of the Meredith family, who can recall using disused, white posts, once cemetery railings, as fire-wood.

Not far across Koru Road, where nothing was noticed during a 1956 investigation, there is now clearer evidence of the site of the monastery which Father Rolland founded about 1868 or 1869.

The late Rt Rev. Monsignor P. J. Power, of Hawera, in the history of the Catholic Church he published in 1925, says that with the coming of peace at the end of the Maori Wars Father Rolland turned to his long-cherished project, the establishment of a monastery.

"Many of the disbanded soldiers joined this new Father-abbot. Some of them, turning their swords into ploughshares, tilled the land after the manner of the monks of St Benedict; others would spend their days instructing the boys who were sent there from many parts of the colony . . ." He recalls that Mr Philip Putnam, well-known at the end of last

century as a leading Wellington choirmaster, was trained at Koru where Father Rolland was noted for his musical talent.

Monsignor Power says Father Rolland made two trips to the South Island seeking funds for his project and during the second of these, on June 8, 1872, came the news that Bishop Vaird of Wellington had died. The monsignor places the date of closing the monastery between this time and the arrival of Bishop (later Archbishop) Redwood at the end of 1874.

Refused

A note in the files of the Taranaki Education Board shows that on November 16, 1871, Father Rolland applied to the Reserve Trust Board for a grant towards the orphanage he had established at Koru but the board decided it could not meet the request. The records of the regional committee state that the monastery was closed before the end of 1874. The Koru area was later known as "Windletown."

In notes held by the regional committee there is mention of the graves of "three or four priests" but this is doubtful for the records of deaths of Catholic clergy and laity, held since the foundation of the church in New Plymouth in 1861, do not include this number. In fact, they show



THE SITE of Father Rolland's monastery built at Koru about 1868 or 1869 is being inspected by Mr H. W. Insull, of New Plymouth, who is standing with his back to the filled-in well. The arrow on the right indicates where the line of the original foundations of the building has remained untouched, although the rest of the land has been ploughed over many times. It is this site which will be further investigated tomorrow by the Taranaki Regional Committee of the National Historic Places Trust.

old monastery (then the home of the Mace family) in 1911 when he surveyed the district.

From his notes it is clear the situation of the vineyard and the cemetery is in dispute, but most evidence points to the vineyard being on the north side of Koru Road, near which Mr Payne has fairly positive evidence of the site of the monastery buildings. With a well, believed to have been 100 feet deep, at the rear of the buildings and near the edge of a slope, the well has long since been filled in and a tall poplar is among several trees growing over it.

My Lysons' notes, however, suggest the vineyard was on the

slope between the cemetery and Koru Road which divides the monastery site from the graves

Mr Lysons wrote: "One of my host's daughters, now an octogenarian, was kind enough to place her memories in writing on November 10, 1955. She says, 'As regards the monastery I remember it very well. I remember it very well, lived in it till it got burnt down. What year we went to live there I really can't say — I was about 10 years old and that is almost 70 years back. I can remember Father Rolland, priest, used to come out once a year in a cab

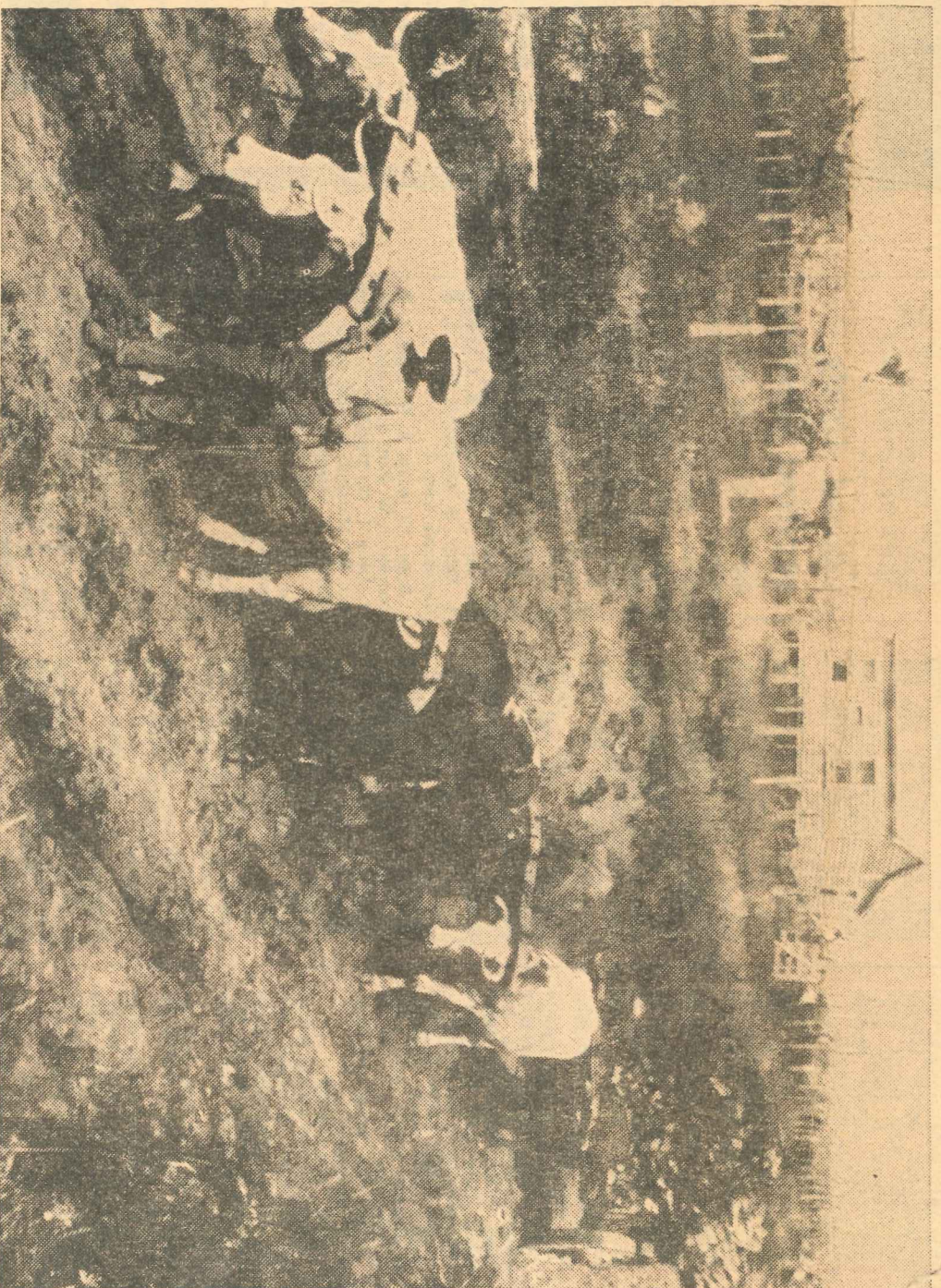
to see us and collect rent. 'The house was large. It had a very large dining room, five

bedrooms and a kitchen, front verandah, side verandah, also one shed at the end that led into a large storeroom, a school house or room, double storied. This was pulled down, so old and falling down. I believe the monks did live there and when we went I'd not go inside for a long time; I was scared.'"

Remembered

Mr Lysons' notes from this woman continue: "The old orchard is still there and the cemetery I remember well. There are

eight or nine graves fenced in but that has all been burnt and regressed. No one ever went there. The notes left by Mr Lysons also recall a raid made on Te Koru by Te Ruaparaha (who died in 1849), which must be assumed, he says, to have occurred about 1831 or 1832. This part of the notes, however, cannot relate to the monastery for the first Catholic priest (or monk) did not arrive in New Zealand, at Hokitanga until 1838. He wrote, "The poor defenceless monks were killed and a cannibal feast took place on the spot. What the raiding party could not eat was carried away on their backs. Executed the monks." However, it is not impossible that some Maori bones may lie with those of the known Europeans on the slopes of Koru and the investigation should go some distance towards establishing fact to replace theory.



ONE OF THE REASONS why the monastery and burial ground on Koru Road, linked back to the days of Father Louis Rolland, did not attract public prominence in the past 50 or 60 years was the condition of Koru Road itself. In this picture, taken in 1910, Mr Edgar Meredith, who once lived on the monastery property, is shown with his bullock team carting firewood. The picture was taken near the junction of Kirihau Road. The old house at the top has long been demolished and on the site the residence of Mr Norman Cloke now stands. Mr Meredith later became well-known as publican of the Okato, Royal and Breakwater Hotels, until his death in 1945.

no record of a priest having been buried there at all.

Father Cleary's question prompts the comment that the Marist Order would long ago have taken steps if it had known (as it would certainly have in its records) that any priests were buried there.

An interesting sidelight on Koru can be found in the Taranaki Museum in the catalogued historic notes of the late Mr E. W. M. Lysons, of New Plymouth, who spent some time living in the