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## The long and winding road

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### OUR STORIES

"People are just beginning to realise what a boon the improvement of the New Plymouth-Te Kuiti Road will be to the commercial community," said Mr C.H. Wynyard, having just driven along its length in January 1924.

"There can be no doubt that the steady stream of tourist traffic that will traverse the road will reflect in a marked degree on the business done in New Plymouth." Mr Wynyard's confidence in the newly opened road extended to a prediction that the following year, the road would carry the heaviest tourist traffic in New Zealand.

The new road had been a long time coming but even then it wasn't completely metalled and punts were still needed to ford the Mokau River. Mr Wynyard had only to wait 10 minutes or so at each crossing, but found the approach to the punt difficult to negotiate. The ferryman told him no car springs had yet been broken, but that such a thing was liable to happen at any time.

Earlier travellers north or south there, had to use a difficult track, initially made for walkers or for those on horseback and in winter this could be a dangerous occupation on the steep inclines of the Awakino Valley. Arthur the mailman was to be congratulated for his persistence in such conditions: "We had six whole days of fine weather, the first for two months," wrote a correspondent to the Taranaki Herald one day in August 1909. "The roads were drying up nicely, but alas for us poor settlers, the rain has come on worse than ever today. The mailman has had a very rough time of it lately, the roads at times being almost impassable, last Saturday he had to set to work and clear a big slip off the road, to get his coach through."

In 1892 horses could be hired to ride the track through from Te Kuiti to New Plymouth. "But it would be cheaper to buy the animal outright," advised a tourist guide, "and sell it at the end of the journey, if it gets there, for they are poor miserable crocks as a rule." Travellers taking the valley track had a bushy zig-zag route, with 11 crossings of the river to make.

One traveller told of his close shave on horseback through the rough terrain. He took a side track by mistake, which turned out to be just a walking track and not wide enough for a horse. As his pony picked its way down a steep incline, he began to realise his mistake. With a cliff on one side, there was no room to turn around and go back.

The only thing he could do was sit and hold on and let his pony pick his own way down the slim and slippery surface. As the nervous animal also realised his dilemma, he leaned hard against the bank on his left to balance himself, crushing the rider's leg while doing so and then gave a little jump across a gap where the muddy track had slid down into the depths of the valley. Miraculously the horse made it and the rider lived to tell his tale.

The demand from settlers and travellers was for roads. There were constant promises from various

government officials over many years, who visited the area, nodded their heads and agreed something would be done. But locals grew increasingly frustrated at the lack of action despite the road through the Awakino valley being described as "important, long-wanted and ever-promised".

Farms and coal mines in the area as well as the potential for increased timber milling and dairy farming were reasons for the road to be built. Newton King started successful stock yards at Awakino, although he made much use of coastal shipping for transport. The existing track through Taumatamaire, about 18 miles long, (nearly 29 km's) wound through mostly the shady sides of the hills, making coaches travel axle-deep in mud for autumn, winter and spring. The proposed route through the Awakino Valley, would have a sunnier aspect and consequently drier roads.

Mokau historian Ian Whittaker, says the long awaited Awakino Valley road and its tunnel was finally put through in the early to mid 1920's and was engineered by Mr Townley. At the north end of the tunnel was a large metal crusher which worked producing metal for the road. One of the reasons for the delays in building the valley road, was because of plans to build a railway.

"The Awakino Gorge was designated for a railway line. They could not put a road through until the railway department gave the land up and that was the hold up, it could have been put through years earlier."

Shipping was a cheaper option and there was a push to keep to that instead, which would also give more business to the developing port of New Plymouth.

"They used a lot of blasting of course," explains Mr Whittaker. "They blasted what we call rotten rock (known as Te Kuiti group limestone) and as it was already shattered, it caused slips for many years after." Nowadays, they use diggers.

Mr Whittaker says he is all for progress, but does not agree with recent calls from within the trucking industry to have the Awakino tunnel removed. Instead he would like the present structure enlarged or a larger one built beside it.

"I think we've got to look to the future, but we should know our past and I think if we can keep some of our past, all the better."

#### References:

TH, June 20, 1892; May 25, 1893; Dec 21, 1895; May 1, 1899; Sept 8, 1903; Nov 6, 1906; Aug 18, 1909; Sept 8, 1909.

Jocelyn Thornton, Field Guide to New Zealand Geology.

Fred Butler's collection of newspaper cuttings.

Footprints of a King, Newton King's Life Story 1855-1927, by Adrienne Tatham.

The Little Ports of Taranaki, by Margaret de Jardine.

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#### CAPTION:

A roadside picnic beside the Awakino tunnel at Easter in 1928. J. Treloar's caravan is parked behind artist Bernard Aris and an unidentified woman sketching the surrounds. Image: PUKE ARIKI PHO 2001-349