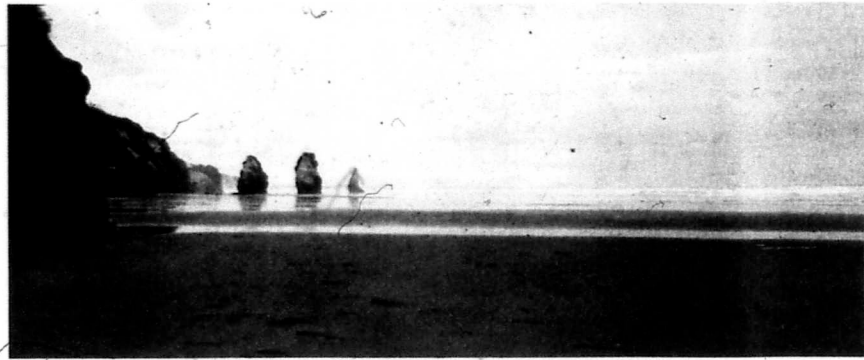


MAGAZINE



ABOVE: The baches at Tongaporutu, which must be gone by 2005.

ABOVE, LEFT: The Three Sisters — resisting the sea that claimed a sibling.

BELOW: The charm of Tongaporutu was not lost on holidaymakers in the early part of this century.

In 2005, the colourful string of baches on the seaward side of the Tongaporutu bridge must be removed.

CHRIS LONSDALE charts the history of the community and asks the locals about their future

TONGAPORUTU

BACKWATER BACHES ON BORROWED TIME

MARY JANE FORTESQUE was born in Coventry in the middle of the last century. She migrated as a child to the other side of the world — a frightening, three-month journey that must equate in its upheaval and enormity to travelling to another planet today.

In New Zealand, she married, at 15, Irishman Dennis O'Sullivan. He died five years later, leaving Mary with three children and in sight of her 21st birthday, but little else.

At 26 she remarried, to James Oliver McKoy, and they moved to a freshly inked dot on the map called Tongaporutu — barely a gleam in the colonial government's eye, and about as far from Coventry as it was possible to get as the last century ticked into its final decade.

It was barely 20 years and about as many kilometres north of infamous Pukearuru, where the last murderous act of the Taranaki Land Wars was hacked into provincial history.

The roguish Ngati Maniapoto warrior party's 1869 slaughter of the Reverend John Whiteley, Lt Bamber Gascoigne and his wife, Annie, and their three children, and two soldiers was still a recent, bloody memory when Mary and James McKoy and their children rode and led mounts along beach and bush tracks to a broad river estuary surrounded by deep mahoe and ponga forests that climbed endlessly into the distant haze of the middle of the North Island.

It had been Ngati Tama country, based on the great pa whose seven palisades ringed the southern (New Plymouth side) hilltop above a tidal cove. For four centuries the tribe had defended its food-rich land and shore against marauding parties from the north and south until being overwhelmed by invading Tainui warriors in the 1820s and 30s.

Half a century later, Tongaporutu land, which was north of the confiscation line, had been widely sold to Crown and private buyers.

The land was available by ballot and lease-



DULCIE RICHARDS: A lifetime Tongaporutu resident, she recalls the terror of crossing Mt Messenger by horse-drawn coach.

purchase to farmer-settlers of "sober, steady habits and known good character", and with the muscle and determination to turn the bush into farms. And that was just the women.

It was being surveyed into 100-acre blocks. Survey gangs were also marking likely road routes. A railway line was also planned to link New Plymouth to the north.

Mary and James ("The Boss") McKoy saw their future. They built a home on a track later called Pilot Rd. She cooked meals for survey parties and drovers, while he tended to the visitors' horses and cleared the McKoy headland allotment, opposite the abandoned pa.

James McKoy also shaped into a canoe one of the kahikatea he felled near the estuary's edge. For a few pence — more for saddles and extra gear — he would paddle travellers across the stretch of water too deep to ford at high tide.

Some would return their borrowed mounts to the Maori guides who had escorted them, for a few bargained shillings, from Pukearuru. Some would tow their horses behind James McKoy's canoe to the other side.

Most would take a welcomed break in their journey to what became known as the Ferry House. They could buy a meal, or rent a bed if it was too late, or if they and their horse were too tired to press on to the Mokau or Awakino boarding houses.

Or if Tongaporutu's namesake wind was beating the land with foul weather.

Maori adventurer Whatonga is credited with naming the estuary district and its river. About the year 900, he is said to have sailed and paddled his ocean-going canoe, Kura-hau, far down the west coast of the North Island in a search for his grandfather, Toi.

As darkness fell the paddlers dug deep to power their craft into the sheltering inlet. Tonga: south wind. Po: night. Rutu: to drive into. Or, more poetically, "From the bows of the canoe (butting) into the southerly swell as darkness fell".

Whatonga left not only a new name, but some of his crew with the people he discovered there. He declined local advice to travel overland to search for the elusive Toi, preferring the return sea trip and eventually finding his grandfather at Whakatane.

But those people's spirit was long gone when the settlers arrived, in a rush in the 1890s. The towering, age-old forest, where generations before had hunted or been hunted, echoed to the sound of axe and saw, most of the logs burned

but the best milled or split for houses and fences.

A wharf was hammered into the southern riverbank where little coasters unloaded wire and grass seed and tools and scant few luxuries, and collected the farms' wool and homemade butterfat.

Visiting boats would also smuggle crates of liquor into the "dry" district.

In the century's early years, Moku's first police officer, Constable McGregor, is said to have been on the prowl for whisky he suspected had been dropped in shallow water at sea and brought ashore. At one

Tongaporutu home he sat at "while on the doorstep and chatted with the occupants. The poker-faced men were praying all the while that the sack-covered doorstep would not clink with

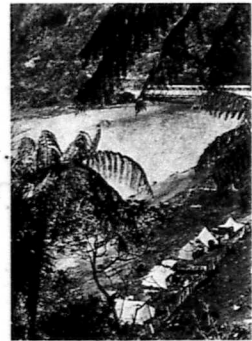
the sound of whisky bottles. It didn't.

A single-lane ironbark truss bridge put James McKoy's canoe out of business when Public Works Minister William Hall-Jones snipped the ribbon to officially open it in October 1902 — two months after the impatient Tongaporutu settlers and travellers had begun using it.

The backwater district that looks so sleepy today was in a hurry at the turn of the century. Within a short decade, more than 100 farms had been settled in the Derwent, Okau and Greenlands "Improved Farms Settlements".

At its peak, nearly 1000 people populated the Hutuwai and Tongaporutu valleys — felling trees and farming, cargo- and boat-handling, timber- and flax-milling, and labouring on the

"I remember my first basket-dance when I was about 12. Ooh, they were exciting."



lengthening thread of muddy roads. On Sundays there often would be 100 farmers and "fishswackers" gathered around the settlement's sole store to talk and collect their goods.

They held "cricket and rugby matches on the flat paddocks of the Gibbs' farm on cliff-side Clifton Rd. As if they could not get enough of it, they had regular wood-chopping contests. They organised bunting-bedecked regattas and picnics, which drew hundreds of people, settlers and their excited families, and Maori from up and down the coast.

On Saturday nights they would gather at the hall they built by volunteer labour in 1904-5, for amateur singing and skits and dances. Sometimes it was the popular basket-dance.

"Ooh, they were exciting," said 86-year-old Dulcie Richards, clapping her hands together as if there were one organised for that night. "I remember my first basket-dance when I was about-12. The ladies would decorate a shoebox they had saved, and each would try to outdo the other. Then they would fill the box with supper. The men would try to find out who owned the boxes — and what was in them — before they were auctioned."

Continued on next page

Tongaporutu baches on borrowed time

Continued from page 17

"The winning bid would also get the lady as a dance partner during the evening, so there was fierce bidding sometimes," laughed Dulcie.

The dances were a welcomed respite from a childhood of unremitting hard work and long journeys to school six days a week. Senior pupils spent three days a week taking lessons at the hall, and another three a 5km boat trip away, upstream at Ahititi.

She vividly remembers tumbling out of the Tongaporutu hall-classroom on the days the horse-drawn coach arrived from Waitara.

"There was such a gathering of farmers and their horses — and dogs everywhere, peeing on the flour sacks and anything else that caught their fancy. When the coach had finished unloading, we kids would try to leap on to the tailboard and steal a ride over the bridge. Usually the driver would see us and whack our knuckles with his whip. We'd fall off, sinking up to our knees in the mud."

Then it was a long walk up the Hutuwai road to the spartan farm where her adoptive father had chopped a farm out of the bush. Eager to get away, she had married at 18 — "when I was 8st 6lb and had an 18-inch waist". She and Percy Richards (92) are about to mark their 67th wedding anniversary after a lifetime of hard work and hard-won shillings, house-keeping for wages by her and farm-working by him.

"When we got married, we had bleached manure bags, stitched together with blankets in between. There were more kids than furniture — it was in the days long before TV.

"Our kids and their kids" — they have 15 grandchildren, 37 great-grandchildren and seven great-great-grandchildren — don't believe it, what we thought was normal.

"They don't believe that I used to go over Mt Messenger in a coach drawn by five horses, like in the black-and-white cowboy films. I hated it. It was terrifying for a little girl, the coach bouncing all over the place. I screamed when it lurched sideways. I thought it was going to tumble down the cliffs, but it probably couldn't even get its wheels out of the ruts."

They live in a neat cabin cluttered with memories at the tidal-river's edge. The Richards' home is among a string of 26 rambling baches and permanent houses that crowd the Tongaporutu Domain, on the ocean side of utilitarian concrete bridge No 171/0-00.

The sawn stumps of the bridge it replaced are deeply rooted in the riverbed below where the ebbing tide has bared the inevitable discarded tyres, lumps of concrete, and driftwood.

An emerald flow, clouded with a hint of clay, slides down the centre trench. A coming deluge will soon turn the Tongaporutu River the colour of milk-tea and send it swirling to the Tasman Sea a kilometre away, licking high at the concrete walls



that shield the row of holiday homes.

Robbie Robertson (69) anticipates the winter rains by clearing a drain across Clifton Rd from his Tongaporutu Domain Cottage No 4.

His house and garage and firewood shed almost completely cover the tiny 263 sq m section. He has watched the river in all its moods for 50 years, since he helped a mate build a bach nearby, and retired to his own cabin 15 years ago. Usually it is gentle and calm, but occasionally it spills over the wall and furiously gnaws at his home's piles.

It takes a bit of getting used to, being this close to the flooding and ebbing estuary. He recalls bringing a couple of young brothers from a relative's Okato farm to spend a few nights by the seaside. They speared flounder until the night and the tide forced a halt. He gave the lads a torch in case they needed to find the outhouse, but heard them over the next couple of hours padding mysteriously in and out of the front door.

Then he heard the whispered observation: "Look, see, the tide is going down again." To which the younger brother replied: "Thank God. I couldn't have slept otherwise!"

But the concrete fortifications, packed behind with dumped roadworks' clay, might not be enough to save the row of Caribbean-coloured baches. Of mixed legitimacy, they began life in the 1930s on a scruffy strip of lupin- and gorse-covered riverbank that neighbours were pleased to see cleared. Over the mid-century decades they were accepted by various councils, which collected rents and rates — between \$700 and \$1000 in total in 1999 — and, in 1975, granted 30-year, non-renewable leases.

The land is now jointly governed by a sympathetic New Plymouth District Council and the notoriously stringent Department of Conservation, anxious to clear the hallowed Queen's Chain of public access. When the leases expire in 2005, DOC wants to see Part 23 of the lease applied: "Termination of the lease by the effluxion

of time . . . with the removal of all buildings and other structures, the land levelled and left neat and tidy".

As if they were never there.

But, as Robbie Robertson says, the public can walk the riverbed half the time, according to the tide, or use 200 metres of road that connects the two pieces of grassed domain.

"We're hoping for a reprieve — there's ample precedent for it. I get over to the Coromandel quite a bit, up Colville way, and there's baches there built in the strangest places, but no one is bothering them. Why pick on us? It's not as if, when we're gone, anyone will be allowed to use it for camping. It will just be to meet the narrowest interpretation of the law.

"I won't be here forever, but these fellas," he said, tapping a photograph of his grandsons, "might be interested in keeping it going. What about keeping them in the bach-owning families, surrendering the leases only when family can't, or won't, keep them up. That's been done before."

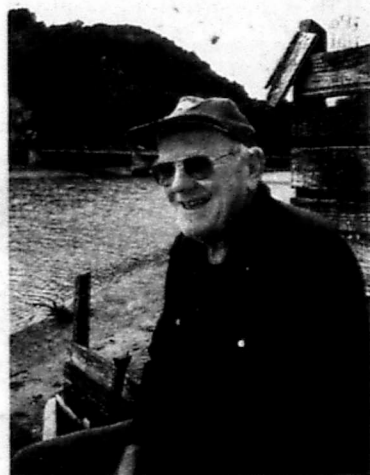
It is doubtful that Tongaporutu will be under serious public recreational pressure in the immediate future. A 1996 survey hinted only at "potential".

On Taranaki's most golden summer days there is rarely a crowd above those who populate both the leased baches, and the freehold cluster on the inland side of the State Highway 3, about 70km north of New Plymouth. The domain at the bridge end of the condemned baches has a concrete boat ramp. Visitors must wade through long kikuyu grass and weeds to get to the broken block barbecue and pair of bench-tables made of half-round poles, under the pohutukawas.

At the ocean end, beside ugly but clean concrete-tank changing rooms and a loo, the occasional camper might risk an unpermitted night or two. When the tide is in and the river untainted by inland rain, the harbour-sized estuary offers safe swimming, warmed by the sea's shallow spread over the sandy flats. When it is out, visitors can walk to the ocean beach where the relentlessly slimming "Three Sisters"

WHY US? Robbie Robertson (right) says the baches should be allowed to remain in the families of the present owners.

SAFE HOUSES: These homes (left), on the inland side of the bridge, will be allowed to stay.



stand puzzled at the disappearance of their fourth sibling, pummed to death by storms in the century's first decade.

One of many nearby caves in limestone cliffs colonnaded by the scouring surf had Maori carvings in its ceiling, believed to have been done by last-century hunting or warring parties using the beach thoroughfare. One was a six-toed footprint that some thought depicted Te Rauparaha, believed to have had 11 toes.

But puzzled the artist just could not count. Besides, his error has been rubbed out by the abrasions of countless tides.

On the inland half of the Tongaporutu community, past the children's bus shelter painted in Taranaki rugby stripes, past a collection of letter boxes beside overgrown orchards, the 95-year-old hall stands its corrugated iron walls reclad in fibroplanking, and corralled in portable electric fencing for stock to mow the lawns.

A 1998-99 summer events poster fades and curls in a front window. The Sack Attack rubbish collection on December 27 sounded community-spirited, as was the next day's fire drill. On the last day of last year, there was a bring-your-own fireworks party and sausage sizzle. But don't drink too much; there's tennis the next day.

On January 2 there was a South Pacific theme dance, with the Wayne Morris Band. Children \$1, adults \$6 and plate. It is doubtful, even with Wayne's best efforts, that any 12-year-old girl will cherish the memory 70 and 80 years from now, as Dulcie Richards does her crowded Basket Dances, swirling now to ghosts.

Nor, perhaps, would hard-working Mary McKoy have enjoyed her evening whisky so much if it had not been sneaked past the perplexed Constable MacGregor. She might, however, toast the irony of such toil by so many ending in a squabble over a tiny sliver of the plentiful land, and for the idle hours of such a few. □