

FEATURE

# Where Rowan was once



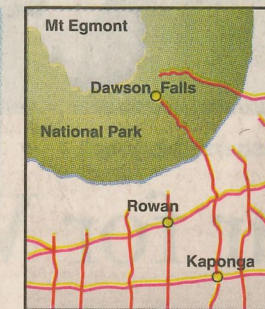
In the latest in his series on Taranaki's forgotten places, **DAVID BRUCE** visits the locality of Rowan, on Egmont National Park's southern flank

**F**OR sale for removal, an old hall, used to be a school. It has gone now, demolished for its heart rimu and matai, but until a few weeks ago the old school still stood on its lawsoniana and holly-hedged section at the intersection of Rowan and Opunake roads.

All that remains are its foundations, rows of stone piles that show the auger holes of long-ago blasting and the stumps of its chimneys. Beneath a surface coat of weeds there is evidence of a hard surface, a tennis court perhaps or the court where long forgotten basketball games between the girls of Rowan and the girls of Mahoe, Makaka and Kaponga were played out.

A nearby paddock, once sprouted goal posts and was the proving ground for their rugby-playing brothers, the hedge a huddled shelter for their parents. In the warmer seasons it would have echoed to the excited calls of bull rush and rounders, the click of cricket bat and ball. School ponies grazed the four-acre glebe that is still maintained by the Rowan domain board.

The old school had seen a lot of changes in the 111 years it stood on its site. When teacher George Everiss rang the school bell for the first time in early 1892, there were 16 pupils to answer its call. Their parents, some of the settlers who had moved into the area in the mid 1880s. By 1926 the roll had risen to its peak of 42, drawing children from as far away as



**TOWN CENTRE:** With the old school building gone, Rowan exists now only in the name of the road that runs through the locality.

Photo: KRYSTI WETTON

Dawson Falls. When, the following year, Falls House manager James Murphy took his five children from Rowan to be home-schooled by his sister, he started a trend that would see the roll eventually fall to 28 in 1938 when the school closed and consolidated in Kaponga.

The school would have been shrouded with the smoke of the bush fires that raged in the district in October 1893 and earlier in the same year, seen the establishment of a twice-weekly carrying service that linked the settlement with Stratford. In 1894 it saw postmaster Robert Thomas opening the village's post office, the metalling of Rowan Rd in 1896 and, in 1897, the opening of New Plymouth entrepreneur John Crockett's short-lived dairy company.

A few hundred metres east along the Opunake Rd, on a branch of Dunn's Creek, a more permanent creamery, a branch of the Kaponga Dairy Company, opened in 1898. Later, for two seasons between 1909 and 1911, it would become an independent co-operative before reverting to the Kaponga Company. Upgraded to manufacture

cheese, for many years the factory would be the home of the Rowan Post office (a slot on the front door); both would close in June 1960.

Early last century the school would have heard the roisterings of the men of Rowan when the itinerant wine merchant made his annual call. Local legend recalls that the day he came around with his samples was bad enough but the day the orders arrived at the factory was positively dangerous.

The school was there when W.C. (Walter) Clement first started milling on a 300-acre block on Upper Rowan Rd in the 1890s. Later a bush tramway connected Upper Rowan Rd to the new mill he built on the Upper Manaia Rd in 1904. By 1907 the mill was a sizable operation employing 11 men and turning out 350,000 super feet of sawn rimu and kahikatea a year.

A less significant employer was Charles King. In 1917 he was listed in a directory as a tailor of Rowan. By the 1920s the good timber around Rowan had been cut out and the mill had moved on. A handful of contractors like Joe Chamber-

lain and Thomas Kay still worked the bush remnants, cutting firewood for dairy factories.

The rather pretentiously named Rowan Athenium Institute built the original Rowan hall diagonally over the Opunake Rd from the school in the early 1900s. From its name it could be assumed the institute intended the hall to be a place of learning, perhaps even doubling as an ex officio library. Probably it was the forum for the heated debates that split the community in 1920 over the election of the Rowan school committee.

Dissatisfied with the incumbent committee, a splinter group led by J. Hine ousted them at a meeting in May that year. Undeterred, the losing faction held another meeting in June and voted themselves back in. When the head teacher, Miss James, refused to accept that decision and the school caretaker resigned, it was left to the Taranaki Education board to intervene.

Continued on next page



**BUDDING ARTIST:** Ellis Rowan on her wedding day.



**FINE WORK:** An Ellis Rowan painting of an hibiscus.

## The captain and the flower painter

By DAVID BRUCE

**T**HERE is a twist in the tail of every story – and strange connections. The connection between Rowan, the little township on the slopes of Taranaki and Australian art is tenuous and convoluted but very real.

Rowan was named for Captain Frederic Charles Rowan, an officer in the British Army who was severely wounded on September 7, 1869 at Te Ngutu o te Manu. In the same skirmish in which Major Gustavus Von Tempsky was killed, Rowan was shot in the face.

With both jaws shattered he was repatriated to England where for several years he was subjected to reconstructive surgery. In the context of the time that must have been a horrific experience. Patched up but still in uniform, Rowan returned to New Zealand, via Melbourne, to become Sub-Inspector for the Constabulary of Armed Forces in New Zealand.

In June 1873 he became engaged to Ellis Ryan, a Melbourne socialite. Four months after meeting they celebrated their marriage at the Ryan family home in Richmond, before settling in New Zealand at Pukearuhe.

To overcome her boredom in their isolated post, Rowan, a keen botanist and artist himself, encouraged his new wife to paint the native flora and offered helpful criticism of her early paintings. In January 1875 Ellis Rowan returned to her parents' home where she painted for six months while awaiting the birth of her only child, Frederic Charles Eric Elliott Rowan, (known as Puck). Following the birth, she returned to New Zealand.

Three years later Rowan resigned his commission and moved to Australia to become a prominent businessman in the heyday of "Marvellous" Melbourne. As a corporate wife, Ellis Rowan accompanied him on business trips around Australia, painting whenever she had the opportunity, for the government botanist and family friend Ferdinand von Mueller.

Today, 80 years after her death, Ellis Rowan is still regarded as one of Australia's greatest flower painters. □

# Time consigns Rowan to history

Continued from previous page

At the September meeting, education board chairman P. J. Whyte reported that he had "met with the settlers to discuss the matter and decided the meeting had been improperly postponed from April in the first place". On his order the previous chairman, Mr Doyle, reconvened the election, in due course confirming Messrs Hollard, Maindonald, Burrow, Jackson and Lines as the new committee.

Aside from the political brouhaha, 1920 was a busy year for the school. Not only had new teachers Misses Mary Ryan and Elizabeth Leach been appointed to the staff, but also, between May and October, workmen had been adding on another classroom. Nearby, the school house was being built. Previously all the school's teachers had boarded in private homes. The school was closed during August because of a chicken pox outbreak and the education board was using a shortage of suitable timber to explain the slow delivery of additional desks. While the school was being added to, the Rowan hall probably was the seat of learning.

The school would have sat empty for the first four months of 1925 as an infantile paralysis (polio) epidemic swept across the country. Cases were reported in nearby Kaponga and each week school work for all Taranaki students from standard one to the sixth form was published in the local papers. To avoid contact with their teachers their work was sent and returned by post or dropped in a box outside the teacher's home.

When the school closed, a raiding party stripped it of its desks and fittings to cater for the influx at the Kaponga School. The school clock went too but was promptly returned when its real owner, a Rowan farmer, complained. Sitting empty for a decade, the school was the occasional base for a half-hearted tennis club, but when the Rowan hall over the road burned down in 1948, the school came back to life — as the new Rowan hall.

Rose Gargan remembers the Country Women's Institute meetings and events she attended at the school since she first moved to the Rowan district as a young bride more than half a century ago.

"We used to have speakers come to talk to us on all sorts of subjects, and would visit other institutes and have them visit us. There would have been 20 or more of us then."

The Rowan Institute put on plays and had competitions for cooking and homecraft skills such as knitting and sewing and ran the annual June changeover pot-luck tea to welcome new farmers and sharemilkers and farewell those who were leaving. It also co-ordinated the annual children's Christmas party. Until a year ago the Christmas party was a treasured Rowan tradition; every dad in the district took his turn to play Father Christmas and on one



LAST TRACE: The Rowan hall (above), which once was the school, shortly before its demolition.

HALL COMMITTEE: From left, Vic Morgan, Charlie Matthews and David Smith pick through the remains of the old hall.

Photos: DAVID BRUCE

unforgettable occasion the party catered for a community of 97.

Chairman of the Hall and Domain committee Vic Morgan ("the moment you came to the district you got voted on to the committee") recalled that the hall was also the place where the community gathered for card evenings,

## Every dad in the district took his turn to play Father Christmas

table tennis, stag parties and the occasional 21st or discussion group meeting.

"They were good times, but in the last few years the only other use the hall got was for the annual hall committee meeting. The younger folk go further away for their fun, even the Institute no longer used it; with a membership fallen to 11 they are just as happy meeting in someone's home."

The TSB chipped in with an annual grant to keep the hall alive but last year the committee chose not to apply. With a new roof needed and next to no call for the hall there seemed no point in trying to maintain it. "We had the silly situation where we were paying \$200 in line charges for the electricity and using \$5 worth, it was things like that that made our minds up!"

At the February meeting of the Rowan Hall and Domain Committee they decided to pull the plug. The ad went in the paper and the hall was up for removal or demolition. Now, after all those years, the school is gone. The domain remains, leased to a local farmer for its grazing, a community asset earning enough to allow the board to look to other options to maintain the sense of community the old school once inspired.

"One day if they put a gondola from the top of Rowan Rd to Fantham's Peak, or tourism takes off, it might be the site for a mountain resort, who knows?" Vic Morgan muses. "Anything could happen. But one thing I would like us to do is use some of those old stone piles and build some sort of memorial. Just a sign, really, saying this was the site of the Rowan school.

"This is Rowan. There is nothing else left." □