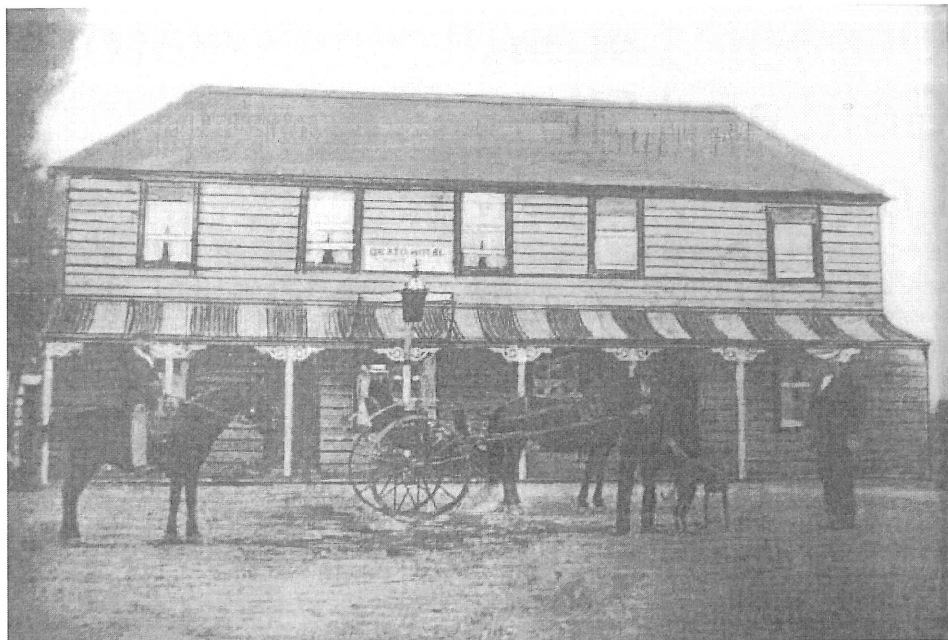


The Stony River Hotel

PART ONE

For generations Okato's Stony River Hotel, situated on the corner of Main South Road and Lower Kaihihi Road, was a gathering place and a watering hole for the adult population of the community that surrounded it. But as horses and carts morphed into motor-driven vehicles, and laws were made to discourage combining alcohol with driving, making a living as a liquor trader in an isolated location became ever more challenging. Hotel Managers Katie and Peter Simmonds had tried everything from band nights to topless barmaids to jelly wrestling to draw custom, but nothing worked. Consequently, on 1st April 2012 as the band wound down, the last pint was pulled, the final drop was downed, and at 9pm the doors swung closed behind patrons for the very last time. After 137 years, the final sentence of the Okato pub's story had been written. It began with one Robert Gray, former Hampton Road farmer, Lloyd Gray's, great grandfather; Kelvin Gray's great, great grandfather. Robert's was amongst the first, if not the first, family to settle in Okato. Robert built the hotel in 1875 on the corner of Main Road and Kaihihi Road and lived there until his death, aged 82. He passed the establishment on to his son, William James Gray, locally known as Willie, who found friendship amongst the Maori community, and became a respected interpreter. In 1926, Willie sold the hotel to Charles Edward Brookes, who stayed for only 18 months before leaving for Auckland. He leased the establishment out for the next five years. Then, unable to find a buyer or another lessee, he returned as publican for the next several. Charles sold the establishment in 1932 to Taranaki Brewery and Cordials. Eventually, he became Chairman of its Board of Directors. The hotel has had many other owners and lessees, who have woven into it their own stories. There was Will Emeny (1912), who became known as "Slippery Bill." And Edgar Meredith (1923), who donated the Meredith Cup which was contested regularly between Okato and Rahotu Rugby Clubs until they, together with Opunake Rugby Club, amalgamated about 15 years ago to form Coastal Rugby Club. Mr Bullock was the publican during the 20s. He was best remembered for his loss of hair. Len Dunne arrived in the 30's and became known as "Dad Dunne", probably because he encouraged the young men not to consume alcoholic beverages, but to drink soft drinks instead. One lessee was Jack Gillard who, when he went to live in Australia in 1963, instigated regular bowling trips between Okato and his local club in Lithgow, New South Wales.

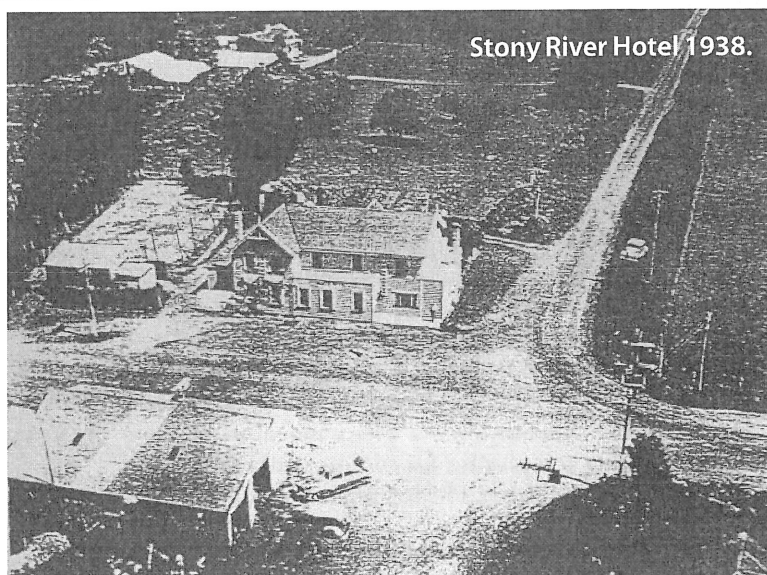


Stony River Hotel 1905.

Lionel and Sybil Simpson were in residence during the late 70's. Lionel became known as "Rumpole" for his resemblance to the character, Horace, Defence Lawyer in the British television series, "Rumpole of the Bailey." Shirley Donald, now Haskell (1996 – 2005), is notable as the sole, solo woman publican. She recalls that patrons were skeptical that she would succeed, but succeed she did. An innovator, she honed the financial systems, installed cameras to tighten up security. created a garden bar, installed a commercial kitchen (her proudest achievement) and converted the original, oval bar into a dining room. So what next for the Okato icon? Well, there are plans to cater for the under fives instead of the over 18s; the hotel will be reinvented as a kindergarten. And the accommodation and restaurant side the business will be re-opened. "Who knows - there might be scope for a wee snug bar in the front of the restaurant," says Katie.

References: *Okato, Tataraimaka, Punihō Districts: Their Stories Told*. Compiled by Irene Waswo 1998. *Okato Jubilee Booklet: 125 years: The history of the Gray family: Minutes from Taranaki Brewery and Cordials*, excerpts from 23 June 1952 – 9 December 1968. <http://www.stuff.co.nz/taranaki-daily-news/news> 11.09.2008 04.06.2011 16.02.2012 04.02.2012

by Kerry Lilley



Stony River Hotel 1938.