

Okawa Bay Mill – a childhood memory by *Raiatea Tahana-Reece* - 1920s & 30s

(Acknowledgement: An authorised extract from The West Rotoiti News - Spring 1986)

Only 7 years old at the time, Aunty Meriha Epiha recalls unforgettable times, happy times - times when the Okawa Bay Timber Mill was in full swing and she and her girlfriends played there. Her father, Tama Tumatahi, was a millhand and worked at the Mill from the early 1920s to the late 1930s.

At 7 o'clock in the morning, the engines from the boiler room chugged into life ... poof, poof, poof, announcing yet another day more than forty years ago, almost another era. An era when black clouds of coal smoke billowed out of the long chimney and drifted across Mourea.

His name was Monty Montgomery. He stoked the coal fires that started the engines. The house was more than twenty feet long and inside was a huge room, full of boilers. The Mill was at the mercy of Monty and that boiler room. When there was no coal, he used diesel – no electricity in those days. Coal was a cheap source of power at 10/- a sack.

No-one minded the girls playing there, not even David Mear, the 'big boss', as long as they kept out of the workers' way. About 50 men kept that Mill going and it was swept clean. Neat stacks of wood, chips and sawdust lined now what is Ngareta Road. When the girls weren't catching koura or whitebait, they were filling sugar bags with wood to take home for the 'old people', or sawdust to smoke trout. Other times they played at the Mill.

'We would sneak onto the barges when the engine driver wasn't looking and when he did catch us, too late. We were already in the middle of the lake. Heru Tamati would tell my father who thought it was a big joke, then we all ended up laughing! It was lovely in those days'.

Working at a bench with a big circular saw in the middle, Tama Tumatahi was sometimes relieved by Joe Newton (Uncle Stan's father). Their job at the table was to saw the timber into carefully measured lengths. Cleanly de-barked slabs of timber would appear like magic, but Aunty Merita remembers where the logs came from. '... Tunncliffe's Mill on the other side of Lake Rotoiti, on barges the size of a house'.

Her father's brother, Matekino, would stack the sawn timber onto 12 railway trolleys, 'the size of a goods wagon'. When the trolleys were loaded and the timber tied down, one gigantic shove sent them all down the tramline – from the Mill, across Takinga Street, through the present League rooms to Pukaretu wharf. At the end of the 820-foot wharf was a workingman's hut for shelter and 'smoko'.

The girls knew when it was 'smoko'. Monty's gong would send out a couple of short poofs! "We would wait for Uncle Matekino to disappear for smoko ... when he comes back, too late. We've already pushed his half-loaded trolleys down the track. Before he can growl we're off, to push the trolleys back to the Mill. He was so gentle. The worst he said was '*... wait until the trolleys are loaded, then push them down the track – or go home!*'

We would ride those trolleys up and down the track all day. Sometimes we would jump on when they were full and Uncle would really go mad. But he was soft and didn't know how to smack!

There were lovely homes built for the workers. Matekino lived in a house on the left of where the League Club now stands. His neighbour was Leo Crawford. At the Okawa Bay Timber Mill, four families lived – Pokiha and Te Pora Hemana, Ned and Tauto Taiatini, Tame and Ani Manahi, and Ray Bilson and his wife.

Most times the two brothers, Tama and Matekino worked alone. Aunty Merita says 'they were the only ones who knew we were around and I'm sure they liked the company'. The Mill closed in the 1940s and was replaced by the Okawa Bay Camp. 'It's a pity it closed. I'm sure the kids of today would have loved it as much as I did'.