

THE ROTOITI TIMBER COMPANY AT MOUREA – *Stanley Newton JP, QSM*

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One would never believe that where the Okawa Bay Lake Resort is now standing and which is unfolding into a beautiful colonial type tourist mecca, there once stood a timber mill which gave Mourea prominence as a centre for our timber industry.

Men like Mr Wackrow, Managing Director for the Rotoiti Timber Co. and Mr Joe Mears, its Mill Manager must have been born with sawdust in their blood, for they came to Mourea hell-bent on a mission to harvest the hundreds of acres of virgin indigenous forest that covered the shores of lakes Rotoiti, Okataina, Rotoehu and Rotoma.

The products of Tane Mahuta, which had grown in these areas for centuries. beautiful forests of rimu, totara, matai, kahikatea, miro, pukatea and rata were about to be hewn down by axe and saw. This was to satisfy an industry which never recognised nor cared for one of New Zealand's greatest treasures, its unique and beautiful native forest.

Between 1922 and 1924 Mr Wackrow and his mining company at Taringamutu and Manunui in the King Country moved their operations to Mourea and by the end of 1924 sawdust was beginning to fly. When I look back to those years of saw-milling at Mourea, as an employee of the company, along with my dad (old Joe they used to call him), I often wonder at the courage, tenacity, ambition and down-right cheek of those men to tackle a huge undertaking such as this one. We were mill-wrights, carpenters, engineers and boat builders for the mill.

The company decided that Ngongotahā was going to be its distribution centre because it was on the railway. The task of hauling timber out of Rotoiti and from the other lakes, and getting it to Mourea by lake transport, sawn into timber and then transported to Ngongotahā across Lake Rotorua was a tremendous operation.

Little does one realise today the ingenuity and the resourcefulness of those men. There was no road transport like today and logs had to be hauled from Hinehopu to Mourea on huge barges and towed across the lake by diesel powered launches. Bulldozers were non-existent and the products of the forest found their way to the lake shore by tram-line and steam locomotives. Steam haulers were used to haul the felled trees or logs into collection areas called 'loading skids'. The tram-line would pick them up from there. After a journey of many miles along the tram-lines on bogies, being hauled by puffing and steaming locos, a load would end up on the shore of lake Rotoiti at Hinehopu.

A large barge and its tug launch would then arrive and load the logs and carry them across the lake to Mourea for milling. This operation normally took about sixteen hours, but when the weather was unfavourable, the barge crew often arrived at Mourea at midnight or later. It took half the following day to unload the barge and there would always be a huge stockpile of logs at the sawmill skids on the lake shore.

The irony of all this happened a few days ago. When the sawmill closed down in 1942 the land had to be cleared of all debris but little did the company know that there were many logs embedded in the mud at the site of the old skids. When the contractors for the marina at the new Resort commenced driving piles for the wharf, they encountered these logs - dozens of them! It was necessary to haul them out and as many as one dozen preserved rimu and matai logs were salvaged.

Steam from a huge boiler inside the mill was used to power all its machinery. A Scotsman named Monty Montgomery was the engineer who cared for the whole plant. A very small man he was, always able to keep a full head of steam with only sawdust and timber slabs to fire his boiler. Sharp on seven in the morning he would blow the whistle and that was the starting time for all hands to work including the Clydesdale draughties, which hauled all the cut timber to a wharf on Lake Rotorua by tram-line and bogies. A trip across the lake by another barge, which was towed by 'Patsy' our favourite launch, got all this timber to the Ngongotahā timber yards for drying and grading and finally for dispatch by New Zealand Railways to many parts of the country.

Pay day for the mill-hands was once every fortnight, there being six working days a week. Once every so often 'Patsy' and its barge would transport all the Mourea families to Rotorua for a shopping spree, there being no road transport over the very rough tracks of the time. That was like a picnic day for all the mill workers and their families; a shopping day in Rotorua via the lake on 'Patsy' and the barge.

For over twenty years the whine of the saws and the puffing of the huge steam engine continued day by day. It was the life-blood and nourishment to Mourea and its families; security and support for many bush workers at the other end of the lake; and a sound and profitable undertaking by the Rotoiti Timber Company.

The mill operations were a wonderful example of our pioneering spirit in this lovely country of New Zealand. Dad and myself laboured tirelessly during every Christmas break of three weeks, when the mill came to a standstill for the holidays; to completely check and repair every working part of that work-horse; saw benches beyond repair were replaced by new ones; worn shafting and bearings suffered the same fate; tram-line and wharfage gear all got a face-lift; the barges and the launches were dry-docked for marine inspection and repair. All in all the Mourea mill got a thorough overhaul for another year of grind and work.

Then came that awful day when Tane had yielded up all of itself and papatuanuku lay naked, bereft of its children. The stately rimu and the majestic totara, the weeping pukutea and the cuddly miro; they were all gone! The bush had been worked out and no more logs were available to the mill. By the end of 1944-45 the Rotoiti Timber Company had uplifted its plant and moved once more, where more native timber was available. It moved to Whakamaru near Mangakino and I believe it is still operating today.

The old mill site then became a holiday motor and boating camp, until last year when the land finally came back to its Māori owners after a sixty year lease. A Trust was formed by the owners of the seven acres of land and once more by courage and enterprise the Trust has now almost completed a most prestigious haven for holidaymakers and tourists, the Okawa Bay Lake Resort.

From a canopy of scrub and manuka to a busy, buzzing sawmill; to campers with boats and fishing rods, and now to a haven for the most affluent of our tourist trade. Mourea moves on to another decade of progressive development.

'He kura tangata e kore e rokohanga; He kura Whenua e rokohanga.'

'People die; are killed, migrate or disappear; not so the land, which remains forever.'

Stanley Newton

