

OUR FIRST YEARS

by Merle Higgie

Beyond sorting out the contents of cupboards, there is little a 17 year old can be given to do when her grandfather dies. I was given one other task - that of informing the N.Z. Founders Society that Harold Richardson had passed away. I knew that my grandfather had been invited to join the Society when it was formed in 1939 as New Zealand was approaching its centenary. When the advertisement appeared in the Wanganui Chronicle for those interested in forming a Wanganui Branch to attend a meeting on Wednesday, 26 September, 1945, that suited me well as I had music lessons on Wednesdays and petrol was still scarce for extra trips to town.

Mr E.J. Burke, the driving force behind the formation of the Wanganui branch, served it well until his transfer to the Christchurch Post Office in 1948. I have enjoyed the Founders and the time spent on our committee. After a few years my father also served on it, and many members were or became close friends of my parents. Mrs Burrell, Mrs Robinson and Mrs Scott-Maundrell were all charming and attractive ladies. Mr W.J. Gilberd was our first able chairman and Mr Scott-Maundrell represented us on the local Historic Places Trust. He was knowledgeable on local and Rangitikei history.

Our first real occasion and AGM in May 1947 was held in the former Y.M.C.A. building on the corner of Victoria Avenue and Plymouth Street. It was very successful with musical items by Mrs Olive Scoular (Mrs Spurdle's daughter who had a fine voice), Miss Thea Collier and myself. I remember feeling a little apprehensive when I saw my pianoforte teacher, Mr Gordon McBeath arrive. We did not approve of Wellington buying elaborate Wakefield House headquarters by borrowing money. Our receipts for 1946 were £13 11 2d.

For some years most gatherings were held in the Victoria League rooms in the Wakefield Chambers, Ridgway Street. Committee meetings were in the Alexander Museum office. Mrs Flora Spurdle served in key positions from the first year. Very intelligent, with a wide knowledge of Wanganui history, she had the same gracious manner as our Mrs Marks. Her love of historical events was instilled through listening to her mother and grandmother. A born story-teller, I remember her keeping our children spellbound on the long trip to a Parihauhou outing. Another Museum executive Mr Max Smart made outings outstanding. Excavations on former pa sites on the McGregor farm at Waitotara were made fascinating to both children and adults.

Memorable evenings held in Mr and Mrs Russell Scoular's Rees Street home were always dominated by the fairyland view of lights from their large lounge windows. The first such evening was for Mac and me as a pre-wedding presentation.

Another in 1961 was on the departure of Mr and Mrs George Walker to Hunterville. The Nixon family would be the largest early family group. Mr A. C. Nixon with his wife returned from 30 years in India and he soon became our chairman. Three other Nixon members included Mrs Ingleby Morrison, the then bridge-to-bridge swimmer. Families to have provided members over many years include the Bruce, Cameron, McGregor (K. Coates), Pratt, Rockell, Roache, Rev. Richard Taylor's descendants, and four generations of our family. During these years we were blessed with members who had a deep knowledge of early colonial life. One was Mr Sidney Mair of North Auckland pre-1840.

We were very touched when in the late 1950s, faithful early members Mr Norman and Miss Olive Russell visited us to present me with their copy of "Wanganui Early Settlers" by J.C. Woon. They wanted someone with a family to own it and knew we would treasure it for the chapter on our Higgie ancestors. In 1971 Mac paid \$16 for a copy at a T.G. Healy auction. The original price in 1902 was 1/-.

Early Founders met two or three times a year. More public efforts included assisting in 1953 with an Early Colonial Exhibition in the Museum (a wide variety of treasure surfaced) and in 1955 arranging and manning our bay at the Wanganui Industries Fair. River trips were popular. We had so many engineers among the members, I'm sure any breakdown could have been repaired. An able chairman was Mr Norman Parkes, a descendant of one of the earliest Wanganui families. He was supported by his sister Linda, and later by his wife, until 1957 when his sudden death shocked us. He considered it a rare privilege to be a member.

These are my reminiscences of early Founders only. Luckily we have Mrs Dorothy Marks, Mrs Kathleen McDonald and Mrs Joyce Mackenzie to carry on with research. The Society's gatherings have always had a friendly family atmosphere. This was realised when the Dominion Council instigated associate membership of husbands and wives. Although records indicate that Mr Smart or Mr L. Bruce attended, their wives were there too.

For many years the Wakefield name was kept alive through the descendants and members, Irma and Beryl O'Connor. Till recent years Founders had national coverage through newspapers and some T.V. on New Zealand Day. The time when the early settlers were just a grandparent away is over. The time when we have pride and remembrance for our ancestors pioneering spirit is not. Nor should it be watered down. It is for present members to publicise the aims of our Society, not only to their own but also to descendants of families not with Founders.

THE BIOGRAPHICAL INDEX

According to the minutes, the first step towards this index was made in 1948 when it was decided to make a list of pre-1860 settlers and for members to give talks about the pioneers. In 1954 a card index system of members was set up and in 1956 Mr George Walker "outlined his project for the collecting of the pedigrees of the pioneering families and asked for the support of the members."

The Index itself was begun in 1963. A questionnaire was sent to all known descendants of early settlers in the Wanganui and Rangitikei district. Mrs Fitzwater undertook the task of recording the information that was sent back and of investigating further when required. She was paid for expenses incurred, such as paper, envelopes, stamps, repairs to her typewriter and a petrol allowance when travelling to the library and to visit descendants for more information. She was assisted initially by Mr Tom Barrett and later also by Mrs Flora Spurdle, Mrs Helen Wilson and others.

When all the information possible had been collected, it was typed onto small cards to be filed in alphabetical order. Five thousand cards were bought from Christchurch and typists employed to do the work. They also were paid, at the rate of \$1 for 30 cards. The letter "G" took 255 cards, the letter "M" 360, and the letter "H" 435. This gives some idea of the cost and the amount of work involved. The Index was finished at last in 1973 and formally presented to the library. Sadly by that time, Mrs Fitzwater, Mrs Spurdle and Mr Barrett had all died and it was left to Mrs Wilson to complete the index and to make the presentation. The cards are filed in small drawers in the Alexander Library and anyone may go and use them for research. An identical index was presented to the Museum in 1974.

Today the library's Biographical Index would be unrecognisable to its originators. Over the years it has been added to by library staff and volunteers, especially from the Genealogical Society. All Wanganui newspapers from the earliest to the latest are being searched for births, deaths, marriages, obituaries and other information about Wanganui district people and this is added to the cards. The Museum Index is still in its original form.

~~~~~ WRITING BY CANDLELIGHT

The script of "Writing By Candlelight" was compiled originally by Mr Tom Barrett and Mrs Esther Harris from the letters and diaries of some of the early settlers of Wanganui.

In July 1972 the Friends of the Library and the Founders Society combined to present the readings interspersed with songs in the Davis Lecture Theatre. Those taking part were:-

<i>Producer</i>	Jean Bauld	<i>Narrator</i>	Dorothy Marks
<i>Readers</i>	Rosamund Brownlie, Neil Corballis, Brian Deighton, Noreen Horsley, Jennifer Nixon, Robin Oliver, Hugh Ross and Hilary Wooding.		
<i>Pianist</i>	Thea Collier	<i>Singers</i>	Rosamund Brownlie and Noreen Horsley
<i>Expenses included:</i>	hire of piano	\$5	
	cartage of piano	\$19	
	tuning of piano	\$5	
	hire of theatre	\$14	

However a small profit was made and divided between the two groups.

In May 1990 as part of the 150th anniversary of New Zealand, another performance was given, again in the Davis Lecture Theatre. Changes included replacing a few extracts by others and including two dances by the Doreen Shaw School of Dancing. Those taking part were: *Narrator* Joyce Mackenzie
Readers Murray Cummings, Richard Horrocks, Rosemary Hovey, Jean Johnstone, Graeme Mackenzie, Anna & Jennifer Nixon, Charles & Vera Thrush.
Singers Ruth and Bill Evans *Pianists* Merle Higgie & Muriel Tinker
Dancers Debbie Beatson, Julanne and Justine Timms and Annette Vige



An outing to Eaglesham in the Makirikiri Valley, 1976. Women from left (only those whose whole face is visible) M.Higgie, G.Ross, unknown, unknown, J.Pratt, J.Anderson, unknown, Mrs Anderson, unknown, Mrs Jackson, unknown, Mrs Fitzherbert, J.Wilson, D.Marks, T.McGowan, M.Purves. Tall man centre back L.Bruce. Behind J.Wilson and D.Marks, R.Marks, H.Ross, R.McGowan.

ARCHIVES - A FORTY YEAR SAGA

In 1954 at Mr Tom Barrett's instigation, a decision was made by the Whanganui Branch to begin collecting books, pictures and documents of historic significance and eventually to build a library to house them, with assistance from the City Council and perhaps a charitable trust. In the long term it was hoped that a proper archive would be set up for all local records and include a micro-filming capacity. This plan was approved in principle by the City Council and it was agreed that in the meantime, everything collected by the Founders would be held in the Alexander Library. The following year a deed was signed between the two bodies setting out the conditions.

The Founders continued collecting, and carried out surveys of local newspapers and the records of schools and other organisations. In 1958 they suggested to the City Council that an archives sub-committee be set up and nominated two members to be on the committee. The Council took no action. The next we read of archives in the Founders minutes is in 1962 when Mrs Spurdle and Mr Barrett objected to the museum extensions plan which included an archives room, citing 21 reasons why archives would be better housed in the library. In 1965 the planned extensions to the library were welcomed but detailed suggestions of improvements were also made.

There is nothing more about archives until 1974 when the library negotiated a new deed about the books they held for Founders, which were still in cartons. They were now to be on the shelves as part of the New Zealand collection, not held separately. This agreement did not include all the pictures, documents and other material collected by Founders. This has yet to be resolved. Some interesting items are among them:- a copy of a letter written by E.G. Wakefield, the first B.A. certificate awarded in N.Z., a copy of the Deed of Sale of the South Island to Wentworth and Jones and a New Zealand Maori War medal.

Other records given to the library by the Founders include the diaries of the Rev. William Woon in 1965, the Biographical Index in 1973, and a list of the location of school registers in 1979. In 1974 Mrs June Springer of the Genealogical Society donated the records of seven local cemeteries which she had recorded. Another hiatus in the archives saga lasted until 1988 when a public meeting was called by the City Council to discuss archives. Mrs Marks attended on our behalf. As a result of this meeting Rosemary Collier was employed to prepare a plan of action. She recommended that an archives committee be formed, a full-time archivist be appointed, and that the museum carpark be utilised as a repository.

Nothing happened. In 1991 the Archives and Records Association of New Zealand decided to take a hand and called a meeting of interested people which I attended. A submission on the draft Annual Plan of the District Council was made which resulted in an increased amount of finance being available the following year. This was used to employ Eamon Bolger for a year to sort out and list the City Council and Harbour Board records. When he finished, a full-time archivist, Penny Allen was appointed in 1994 and the opening of the archives to the public took place this year. On behalf of the Founders I made a submission on archives to the Draft Annual Plan in 1993 and again in 1995, mainly supporting the desirability of a single building to house archives and greater access for the public. An Archives Consultative Committee has been set up by the District Council and I am one of the members. It seems that after 40 years of trying we are at last getting somewhere but the job is not yet over.

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GEORGE WALKER

George Walker joined the Founders Society at the end of 1951 as a young man of 22, working in the Maori Affairs Department. In 1953 he was elected the secretary-treasurer, a position he held until July 1961 when he left Wanganui to farm at Hunterville. In those ten years George Walker, Tom Barrett and Flora Spurdle changed the direction of the Whanganui Branch. They were responsible for starting the newsletter, for the collecting of historic books, pictures and documents and placing them in the library, for advocating a separate historical library, for surveying the old Wanganui newspapers and having them transferred to the Sarjeant Gallery, for surveying school records, for starting to collect the pedigrees of pioneer families which later led to the Biographical Index, and for pressuring the City Council to set up an archives committee.

Mr Walker also wrote a number of articles for the Bulletin. In the September 1956 issue the editor wrote, "*Special mention came in the Society's annual report for Mr George Walker, the very active secretary of the Whanganui Branch for his regular supply of interesting articles for the Bulletin. His remarkable energy has kept that branch in good view of the public in the district and has been helpful to the Society as a whole.*" Again in the August 1959 issue of the Bulletin under the heading "Newsletters" we read, "*Whanganui has certainly set a good example. As a compilation, neat, chatty, informative, its newsletter has certainly maintained a good standard.*" Mr Walker's first son was born in 1959 and an application for his membership of the Founders Society was sent immediately. He was also named George, as Mr Walker's father, grandfather and great-grandfather had been. In Whanganui Newsletter No. 5 we read,

## THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE FOUNDERS SOCIETY TO THE COMMUNITY

Over the years our members have tried to assist community efforts where possible. Here is a list of activities in which we have participated:-

- 1953 Early Colonial Exhibition.
- 1955 A stall displaying historic items in the Industrial Fair.
- 1954 Having the surveyors' chain in Moutoa Gardens unearthed.
- 1959 An essay competition for primary school children. Only two entries.
- 1963 Representing Founders on the Moutoa Centennial Committee.
- 1967 A tableau (an 1860 wedding) for the Horticultural Society's spring show and a display of scenic pictures for a later show.
- 1967 Representing Founders on the fund-raising committee for the museum extensions. A donation given.
- 1969. A display (an 1840 family) for the W.D.F.F. "Wool Week".
- 1972 Donations for the restoration of the Poutama meeting house at Koriniti, the Kerikeri stone store and to the Max Smart Memorial fund.
- 1972 Participation in the "Passing Parade" with the Historical Society to raise money for the Max Smart Memorial at Virginia Lake - a bronze statue of Tainui by Joan Morrell.
- 1972 Attending a memorial service for the victims of the "Avalanche" sinking.
- 1973 Attending the service for the centenary of the death of Rev. Richard Taylor.
- 1974 Representing Founders in a ceremony with the Historical Society to raise the tapu on Kemp's pole so that the pines could be cut and natives planted.
- 1974 To mark the 111th anniversary of the Battle of Moutoa, a new flag, a copy of the original one which was too fragile to be used, was presented by Mrs Jean Bauld of the Wanganui Embroiderers Guild to Mrs Durie Te Huna, a descendant of local Maori who had defended Wanganui in the battle. The silk was imported from Korea by the Founders Society and the sewing done by the Embroiders Guild. It was raised on Moutoa Gardens by the Wanganui Sea Cadets. The flag and an inscription plate are displayed in the Memorial Hall.
- 1978 Representing Founders on the Friends of the Old Cemetery committee and carrying out some maintenance work.
- 1978 A Victorian display at the Art Gallery for the Neurological Society's funds.
- 1978-9 By far the largest fund-raising effort however was the decision to buy a water-colour painting by J.A. Gilfillan of his son Frank, who was killed in the 1847 Gilfillan massacre, and to present it to the Sarjeant Gallery. The sum required was \$1150 and this was actually achieved in 1979 after donations from the Wanganui Savings Bank, the Todd Foundation, North Wanganui Rotary Club and many of our members.
- 1981-2 Representing Founders at meetings on the preservation and removal of Tylee Cottage. \$150 donated.

- 1990 Sponsoring for the Library a lecture by Ian Ward on early Wanganui.
- 1992 Donating two lace shawls to the Museum from the Wellington Founders.
- 1992 Donating \$100 to the Scanner Appeal.

*Founders member have attended the unveiling of plaques on the following:-*

- 1983 The site of the redoubt on Queens Park.
- 1987 The vehicle testing station - site of the murder of the first Maori missionaries to come to Wanganui.
- 1990 Cameron Blockhouse, Hatrick's slipway and John Ballance's house site.
- 1991 A stone on Moutoa Quay where the first Wanganui settlers landed in 1841.

*Founders members attended:-*

- 1982 The dedication service of the plaque on the Broughton monument at Christ Church. Founders assisted with the repairs.
- 1985 The opening of Tylee cottage.
- 1986 The 129th anniversary service at St Peters, Gonville.
- 1987 The placing of a canister in the time vault.
- 1990 A meeting on the Wanganui Central Area Heritage Study.
- 1992 A meeting on Heritage Trails.
- 1993 A service commemorating the 100th anniversary of John Ballance's death.
- 1993 The unveiling of a new headstone on the grave of the Rev John Mason at Putiki. Founders donated \$200 from Helen Wilson's bequest towards the cost.
- 1993 The unveiling of a Memorial Board at Waverley to commemorate the Battle of Moturoa in 1868.



From left: Mr R. Ward National President, Joyce Mackenzie Branch Chairman, Dorothy Marks Immediate Past Chairman, Kathleen McDonald Branch Secretary, at the presentation to Mrs Marks of Life Membership and the "For Service" medal in 1989.

## PROTESTS AND PRESSURE GROUPS

After reading fifty years of minutes and annual reports, I am impressed by how often the Whanganui Branch has tried to change what seemed undesirable and to achieve what seemed beneficial. Over the years these ends have been pursued by letters to the Prime Minister, Government Departments, the City Council, the Founders Executive, the Library, Art Gallery and Museum, other organisations and the newspapers. At times the efforts have included telegrams, petitions, meetings, working bees, donations and money-raising.

Undoubtedly the leading subject for protest or pressure has been Wanganui archives and I will devote a separate section to that.

The following is a list of subjects that our branch has protested against. Unfortunately very few of the protests were successful.

1947 The Founders Society raising a loan to buy Wakefield house on the Terrace in Wellington.

1955 The raising of the Founders annual subscription.

1958-1961 The irregularity and lack of news in the "Bulletin".

1958-1964 The building of the new courthouse on Moutoa Gardens.

1959-1964 The proposal to build a dam on the Whanganui river.

1960 The development of thermal areas for electricity.

1960 The hydro-electric development on Lakes Te Anau and Manapouri. This was in support of the Forest and Bird Protection Society and the N.Z. Travel and Holidays Association and included a petition to Parliament.

1962 The Historic Places Trust disbanding the Wanganui Regional Committee. This was followed by the resignation of the Whanganui Branch from the Trust.

1962 The museum (and not the library) planning an archives room.

1963 The inclusion of a lecture hall in the plan for the museum extension.

1963 The demolition of Ballance's house.

1965 The changes to the Bolton Street cemetery in Wellington and Hagley Park in Christchurch.

1974-1977 The planned use of Queens Park for the new Education Board building or for any purpose other than cultural. This included a petition.

1977 The extension of Ridgway Street over the old cemetery.

1979-1987 The moving of the Wrestlers statue in the Art Gallery. from the central gallery and later the proposal to move it from the gallery.

1985 The National President, Mr Harper, not being invited to the first Waitangi Day celebrations.

1985 The demolition of Wharenui.

1987 The demolition of Hatrick's building.

1989 The virtual ignoring of the first settlers in the Government's plans for the 150th anniversary of New Zealand in 1990.

1991 The proposed De Coubertin Institute on Queens Park.

1993 The naming of the forensic unit as Stanford House.

1994 The Prime Minister suggesting that N.Z. become a republic.

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The following is a list of the subjects that our branch has advocated. Some of these have been carried out, but not necessarily because of our pressure.

1950 on The observance of Waitangi Day.

1953 Erecting signs to mark historic spots.

1958 Replacing the Old Cemetery notice board.

1959 and 1970 The preservation of National Parks and native forests.

1968 The promotion of tourism in Wanganui.

1976 Moving a 4 wheeled wagon from Lambhill to Bushy Park. Carried out by Bert Tonks.

1976 Naming a Wanganui street after Mr F.M. Spurdle, a former mayor.

1977 The development of an historical street.

1977 Restoring a bullock wagon at Lambhill

1981 Improved maintenance of Calver's corner.

1984 Re-erecting a Time Ball on Durie Hill. The quote for doing this was \$4,000 which was too expensive for the City Council.

1984 Having the Oneida bells at the museum played regularly. The Founders arranged for the bells to be played to mark the 60th anniversary of Wanganui City in 1984. They had not been played since 1978 (nor since 1984).

1985 Moving the 1846 stockade guns to their original position.

1991 Improved maintenance of the Heads Road cemeteries (along with the Whanganui Historical Society and the Historic Places Trust.)

Hugh Ross tried very hard to get some action about four of these items but was frustrated. At a 1986 meeting he said, "*As the Government is allowing an 85 percent subsidy for tourism, the City Council should be in a position to do something about the bullock wagon, as well as the Time Ball, the Oneida bells and the stockade guns.*" He died the following year. Should we resurrect any of these ideas?