

A STAUNGH ALLY OF WHITES

Among the best known stories of New Plymouth in its infancy are those concerning the section of Maoris with whom the Europeans were on the least friendly of terms . . . that is, those against whom the settlers and military fought during the turbulent years of the 1860s.

In the light of these more stirring tales it is apt to be forgotten that there were as many who remained on the side of their new neighbours and who did everything in their power to maintain the good relations which should have so benefited both communities. Among these there was one who stood out, and whose loyalty was remembered by the settlers to the extent that a permanent memorial was placed over his grave to perpetuate his memory for all times.

This man was Poarama-te-Whiti (or Pohorama). He was a chief of the Ngatiawa who lived with his people in the Otaka pa which stood on the site now occupied by the Tara-naki Producers Freezing

Company works. Born in about 1800, he probably came to know the Pakeha and traders were not infrequent callers on this part of the coast, and he would still have been a young man when the first trading station was set up at Otaka to bring about the first long-term contact with the whites in 1828.

FRIENDSHIP

This contact blossomed into a firm friendship to the extent that several of the Ngatiawa, including Poarama, were given the opportunity of visiting Sydney on one of the trading trips. However, this idyllic existence in which the Maoris enjoyed to the fullest the

many benefits of contact with the whites was not to last very long.

In the summer of 1831-32 came the celebrated invasion of the Ngatiawa territory by the Waikatos which was to reach its climax before the battered palisades of Otaka pa. But before Otaka was invaded the lands to the north were ravaged by the invaders, with the peak of savage slaughter being reached at Pukerangiora where nearly all of the Ngatiawa people who lived in the Waitara area were either killed or taken into slavery.

From Waitara the invaders moved to Ngamotu where they laid siege to Otaka. The story of this epic defence by the Ngatiawa with a handful of

European whalers and traders is a well known one, but although the Waikatos were eventually driven off in disorder, the pa was no longer considered tenable and a decision was made to evacuate the area until such time as Ngatiawa strength was renewed through the birth of a new generation.

SURVIVORS

Consequently, in June or July, 1832, the survivors of the raids, numbering about 2000, assembled near Senty Hill, and in company with the white traders and whalers, marched south to seek their fellow tribesmen and some of their allies at Otaki, Wellington and in the Marlborough Sounds. However there were some of the Ngatiawa who remained, preferring to hold out on the offshore islands, on their own ancestral lands, and Poarama was one of these.

His next opportunity for contact with the Europeans came in 1834 when the barque Harriett was wrecked on Cape Egmont. On receipt of the news of the disaster, it was Poarama who took a war party to rescue the Harriett's crew, although they were too late to prevent 12 of the crew from being killed and Mrs Guard and her two children carried off. But they were able to save the remainder and lead them to safety at Ngamotu.

After their defeat at Otaka it was, of course, only a matter of time before the Waikatos should return seeking revenge, and this came in 1835. Mikotahi pa, last stronghold of the Ngatiawa, fell and Poarama and his gallant people were taken into captivity.

INFLUENCE

By being taken at this particular time Poarama was fortunate, as the influence of the missionaries was already making itself felt. There was, apparently, none of the former savagery or cannibalism associated with their defeat, and slavery was a field which was receiving vigorous attention from the clergymen. Consequently, within less than four years, Poarama and his people were released through the intercession of the missionaries and allowed to return home to Ngamotu.

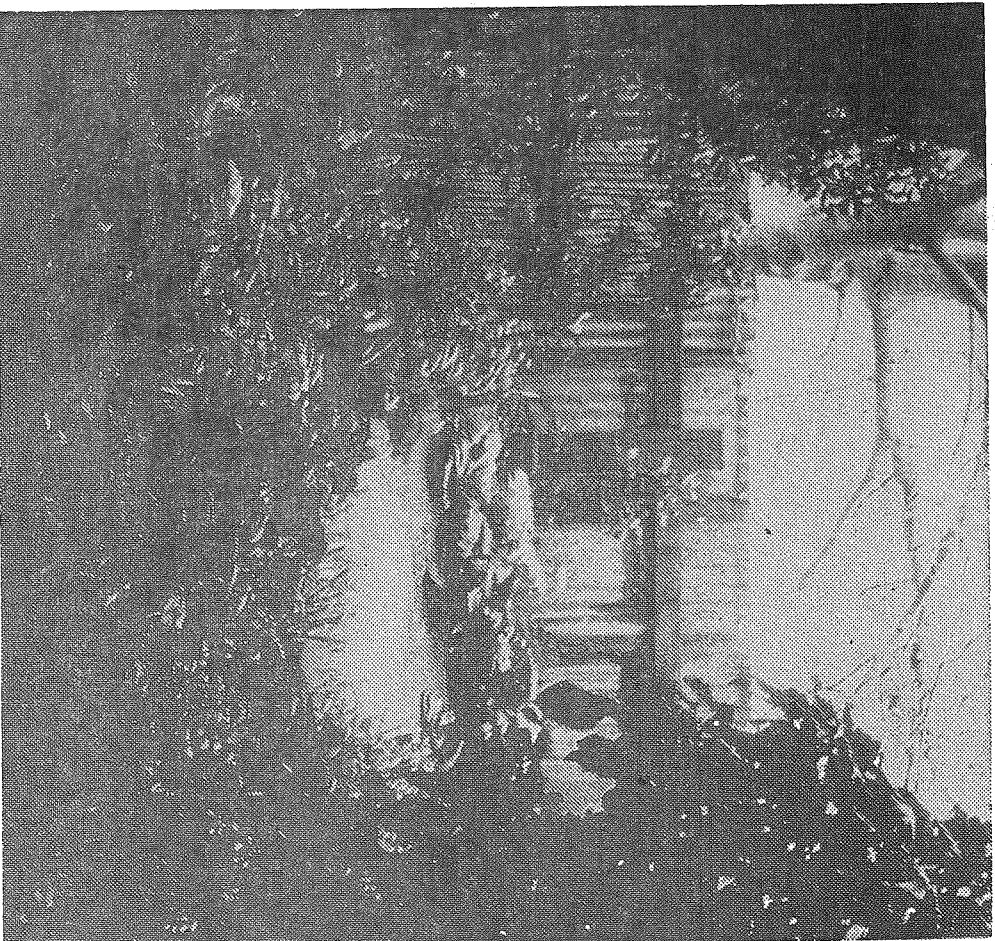
Thus this friendly chief was there to welcome the settlers when the first of their ships arrived to set them down on the soil of this new land.

From then on, during the troublous and often dangerous years before open warfare broke out between the races, Poarama took on the determined role of protector of the settlement, prepared even to fight his own tribesmen in defence of his new-found friends. However, it must be emphasised that this would have been a last resort; he was essentially a peace maker and on many occasions, some of them probably unknown to the settlers, he and his ally, Honi Ropiha, talked trouble away from the settled areas.

SUPPORTER

To the end of his life Poarama remained a loyal supporter of the British, and a few years before his death the Government recognised this by building him a home on the site of Otaka pa. Here he lived until his death in 1878.

Today he is still among his friends, as his grave occupies a small and pretty plot at the entrance to the Tara-naki Producers' Freezing Works, a humble acknowledgement of his loyalty to the people of New Plymouth.



The tree-shaded grave of Poarama in Hakivan St, situated near what was the western corner of Otaka Pa.