

AOTUHIA.

From, "A History of The Whangamomona County. 1940."

Aotuhia is one of the early settlements in the Whangamomona county. It is situated about 13 miles east of Whangamomona township, and near the Wanganui river. The topography is high, broken, steep hills, narrow valleys with streams flowing through deep gorges; blue papa and sandstone formation, originally densely covered with bush, the timber varieties indicating that the land would develop into good grazing country when cleared and farmed.

By 1896, the Wanganui River had been cleared of snags to the Tangarakau River mouth and a landing established from the natural silt buildup. The Tangarakau River was cleared of snags and made navigatable to the Putikituna and beyond until the 1904 flood filled the river with logs and snags rendering it unusable.

In 1906, the first settlers arrived to take up land on the Eastern side of the Whangamomona River. Arriving at the landing on the Wanganui River a track was put through the five miles to Aotuhia. Initially a bridle track from the river it was widened to become the Whangamomona to Wanganui River Road and in 1918 the Tahunaroa Road.

The greater length of the track was cut out of steep hillside, here and there across the face of a papa bluff towering on one hand for two to three hundred feet and on the other a drop into the gorge below.

Many horses were injured or lost from negotiating fallen timber, slips over the track or where the track had slipped away leaving a narrow ledge to scramble around.

Goods dumped on the landing could be swept away if not recovered and swarms of rats would destroy stores if left behind.

In 1910 money was allocated to the Tahunaroa Road improvement and the upkeep of the landing including a shed and boom to lower bales of wool down onto the boat.

By 1914, the Whangamomona Road was opened to Aotuhia which gave the settlers a more reliable access. Bush was cleared off the sections and families were brought in, houses were built and a settlement grew up. Education for the children was a problem for the settlers with either correspondence or boarding school. The nearest established school being at Whangamomona.

A household school was set up at O'Dea's on the Okara Road and a school was established at Aotuhia but this closed fairly soon after. Settlers were forced to leave their holdings and move closer to a town for their children to attend school.

The period after the Great War (W.W.1) was very prosperous with good returns for farmers for their stock and produce. The depression came in 1929 with a plummet in returns for farmers and a deterioration in the pastures with a drop in stock numbers and people not being able to stay on the land.

And so the settlement was abandoned to go back into scrub and manuka. People walked off with little more than what they could carry. The Tui Domain just over the concrete bridge once rang to the sound of sports meetings and music was once again silent, the last meeting held in 1937.

The concrete bridge that crosses the Whangamomona stream at Aotuhia is a feature of the area being built in 1937, the same time as the famous "Bridge to Nowhere," in the Mangapurua valley. Ironically both of these bridges were built after the settlements had been largely abandoned.

At Aotuhia the concrete bridge replaced a swingbridge which had fallen into a state of disrepair and become quite dangerous to use. This bridge was also the only access for settlers on the Eastern side of the Whangamomona stream.

The Whangamomona Road was metalled in the 1920's following the Whangamomona County having taken out loans for this purpose. Metal was railed to the railway yard and carted from there. Also a shellrock quarry was opened on Ben Neustroski's block just up the Whangamomona Road from the bridge. This was quarried until 1928 when it closed.

By 1940 Wylie was the only settler left in Aotuhia and his property was described as. " Today the whole section is in grass and free of second growth with post and wire fences in stock proof order of first class Totara.

A substantial and roomy shearing shed on heavy Totara piles, the building timber pit sawn of first class heart capable of holding 3-400 big sheep. A gorge is crossed by a suspension bridge of fencing wire and split timber capable of carrying a ten ton load.

The house is of eight rooms with a wide verandah right around, cooking range and hot water with a sink and a bath.

Electricity is generated from a waterfall not far from the house and is installed in the shearing and cow sheds, outbuildings and the house. Batteries are charged, a radio set run along with an electric kettle and iron.

Under the Wylie's management the abandoned land is showing promise of a return to former productivity."

In 1942, a flood closed the Whangamomona Road with washouts and slips, the logs jammed under the brige at Aotuhia a testament to that flood. The Government of the day refused to reopen the road and Ted Wylie was forced to abandon his property and move out. Thus after thirty six years Aotuhia was abandoned totally.

The area was then leased out for grazing only and farming facilities such as buildings and fences were removed.

The Murphy family, Neil Buchanan and Bob Lobb grazed the area. In 1944 approximately 11,000 acres was held under miscellaneous leases.

Freehold land was held by. L.C. Baker Estate 492 acres. Gilmour and Manning 1915 acres. S.L. Wallath LTD. 1395 acres. Leslie Properties 2145 acres.

Wild pigs were a problem in the area with one farmer in May 1945 reporting "That in the previous twelve months, 1400 wild pigs had been shot on his property. The infestation was so bad that he had shot several from the verandah of his home."

In the 1960's moves were made to resettle Aotuhia and re develop the land.

In 1980 Government approval was given to reopen the road from Makahu and create farmland from the reverted land with modern techniques and management.

1981 the Whangamomona Road was closed to allow the Department of Lands and Survey to redevelop the Poarangi and Aotuhia blocks with a view to developing twelve farms .

1985 and the new road from Makahu over the Mangaehu and Kohi roads was opened with a new bridge over the Tirohanga stream.

Land development was stopped in 1987 following environmental concerns over the Kiwi population in the area and the block was run as one entity. Today the area is both privately owned with large areas also owned by the Department of Conservation.

From 1922 to 1926, the Whangamomona County Council borrowed £8800 to spend on the Whangamomona Road to be paid back from 1959 to 1963. Another £1000 was raised in 1919 for the Okara Road to be repaid by 1956.

In 1944 it was reported. The Whangamomona Road loan area comprises 3054 acres. During the period between 1930 and 1937 most settlers left the district due to the combined effects of deterioration of the lands and pastures and the economic depression. (Drop in the prices of primary produce.) In 1944 approx 11000 acres was held under miscellaneous leases from the Crown. (Note at present approx 11609 acres is held under miscellaneous leases.) The general exodus of settlers from the area has been hastened and facilitated by the Crown Lands Department refusing to entertain any application for permanent tenures and by removing farming facilities such as buildings and other improvements, in the area covered by miscellaneous leases.

In 1921 the area was valued at £30,224. In 1944 at £3856.

In 1959 a report stated. Shortly after WW1, the Whangamomona County raised two loans totalling £9800 for roading and development of an area of land for a serviceman settlement. The scheme proved a failure and revenue has been insufficient to meet charges. A deal was worked out with the Government and the loan written off in 1974.

The following was reported in the "Daily News." 15/6/1986.

#### AOTUHIA HIDES ELUSIVE TOTARA.

Lost, one Totara tree 21m (63 feet) girth, up to 2000 years old, vicinity Aotuhia.

Mr Felix Hunger, Stratford first sighted the tree in 1945 while pig hunting with his brother Jim, now of Wellington. On the return trip they had got slightly lost and stumbled onto the totara by accident. Astounded by its size they had nothing to measure it with but Mr Hunger's rifle. "My rifle was three feet long and the tree was 21 lengths of it," he said.

In 1977, the pair went back confident to find it, but twenty trips and nine years later the tree still remains lost in some 600 acres that makes up the Aotuhia block.