



MR JACK NISBETT, who worked for 37 years at Ngamotu Beach, pictured on the balcony of the Palladium he once managed. With sadness he spoke about the "good old days" at the beach and the hours of voluntary labour which turned the area west of the Palladium (background) into a popular summer amusement centre.

The golden days of Ngamotu Beach

(By Graeme McGregor)

The great days of Ngamotu Beach are over, and like a rising tide, harbour works are creeping along the beach—recognised as one of New Zealand's safest swimming beaches.

Although half the beach remains for public use, the middle of latter but somewhat picturesque beach-shade is long gone and the remaining facilities in the carnival area will disappear soon.

Though the Palladium escapes this phase of port development, the dilapidated two-storey structure lies empty.

On New Year's Day 1917 when the \$3400 Palladium had just been completed, the beach was grandly billed as "The Playground of the Pacific."

And as the sand slipped away from East End, then Taranaki's premier beach, Ngamotu became the province's beach playground. It's New Year's Day picnics drew families from 50 miles away. And as public and private transport improved, the Ngamotu Beach crowds grew thicker.

Excursions

Ambitious fund-raising carnivals began about 1935 and the beach really became a top spot for entertainment.

Excursion trains used to run from Whangamomona and from South Taranaki. Up to 45 school and church picnics a year were held at the beach.

But from the late '50s, with more cars, more counter-attractions and a growing trend for families to split up for recreational pursuits, the beach began to suffer from this competition.

Subsequent carnivals were not so well supported and the last was held in 1968. By then the Taranaki Harbours Board had begun its port expansion scheme, which included

the third wharf now being constructed on the western half of the beach.

But the beach still has vitality. The children's playground is probably the most-used one in the city and on New Year's Day this year an estimated 1000 cars packed the area.

Meeting

It is difficult to understand the city council parks and reserve committee's proposal that the council hand back its 36-acre Ngamotu Beach area to the board and concentrate on developing the beach west of Nobu Line.

Many people still prefer to swim at Ngamotu and the future of all forms of boating activity, including water skiing is assured.

Perhaps the committee's proposal will be reviewed if submissions by the harbours board's deputations to the city council meeting on February 3 contain promising assurances.

It appears that the board is keen for the council to stay. Presumably it will provide information on such matters as:

- Harbour pollution.
- Future harbour works.
- A possible boating marina.
- Sand buildup on the remaining area.
- Whether the board can offer any assistance.

Advice

After background research, I believe the soundest advice is that offered by the board in July 1959 during discussions with a three-man oil refinery site investigating

team from the Royal Dutch Shell Oil Group:

"Sooner or later Ngamotu Beach is in danger of being swallowed up by industrial development, so the public could be urged to make the most of the area while it can."

I spoke to several people who have known the beach for many years. Asked whether he thought of the beach in its present state, accountant and former Ngamotu Beach Committee secretary Mr W. S. (Kai) Thomson said: "It makes me weep."

Mr Thomson, with Mr and Mrs Jack Nisbett, chatted about great moments in their days at the beach when helping to improve its facilities.

Mr Nisbett, who worked on the beach from 1928 to 1968 as a committee-man, custodian, pavilion manager and later caretaker, recalled that in the early '30s there were sandhills and lupin around the Palladium and he and Mrs Nisbett often had to walk through seawater to reach the building during spring tides.

Ocean View Parade was not constructed until just before the Second World War, so the sand went right to the doorsteps of the beachfront cottages.

Purchase

The city council obtained use of the 29 acres from Bayly Rd to the Hongi Hongi Stream in 1934 after buying the assets of the Ngamotu Seaside Resorts Company which included the Palladium and seven cottages, Nos 20, 24, 31, 32, 33, 34 and 35. (Seven more acres

were added west of the Hongi Hongi Stream in 1947).

The company, formed about 20 years earlier by a group of people to develop the beach, offered all its assets to the council for \$600. This, with money on hand, enabled the company to repay \$1600 to its shareholders, comprising their whole contribution plus interest at 6% a year—which had been unpaid for the last 17 years.

The council appointed a committee to control the domain and later advanced it \$400 to lay out and equip the children's playground. In 1935 Mr Thomson became its secretary and, with a break to serve overseas during the war, was a committeeman until 1947.

Historic

Without doubt the landing of the first settlers on Ngamotu Beach on March 31, 1841, was the beach's most historic day. But exactly 100 years later the re-enactment of that landing was the beach's greatest day—with an estimated 25,000 people on the sand by 11 a.m.

The Nisbetts can still recall the vast amount of food they sold—but it still wasn't enough for such a crowd.

"We had 40 people on our staff on the day and began preparing food a fortnight before," Mrs Nisbett recalled.

They remember the first carnival in 1938. "We first held a fireworks display to get money to launch the carnival," said Mr Nisbett.

"We formed the New Zealand Girl Marching Association to get the movement going and got 38 teams for the carnival," said Mr Thomson.

With humour they recalled the bonfire on one New Year's Eve when somebody lit it prematurely for a lark.

The war

Mrs Nisbett remembered the years of the Second World War when beach life died, pill boxes were constructed on the beach,

Taranaki will ultimately lose more of its sandy Ngamotu Beach in New Plymouth.

Whether the New Plymouth City Council will now continue to maintain it as a swimming beach and recreational area will be the subject of discussions between representatives of the Taranaki Harbours Board and the council on February 3.

In this article, and in another next Saturday, the Taranaki Herald reviews some of the history of the beach and future prospects.

soldiers occupied some of the cottages and armed guards prevented anyone going on to the beach at night.

First, Mr Nisbett was called up for Army service, then one by one Mrs Nisbett's three female assistants either joined the services or were man-powered. Finally, she had to close the tea-rooms.

But towards the end of the war activities resumed.

Mr Thomson and Mr and Mrs Nisbett agreed that the late Mr George Roper did more for the beach than any other individual.

"He worked there day and night," said Mrs Nisbett.

Mr Roper was a key worker in building the retaining wall from just west of the Palladium to the Hongi Hongi Stream.

The mairi gras consolidated on this area and ultimately a soundshell, skating rink, miniature-railway and a crazy golf course became permanent features.

Enough

Then, with the harbours board announcing plans for a third wharf and declining support for their mairi gras, the volunteer workers had had enough. In 1968 the control of the domain was given to the city council's parks and reserves committee.

Before I began my research, the director of the Taranaki Museum, Mr



CARS pack Ngamotu Beach in the mid-1930s when Taranaki was recovering from the depression years. Local motoring experts date the cars from Model T Fords to a 1935-36 American car. The car second from the right in the foreground has been identified as a 1931 Jubilee-model Buick.

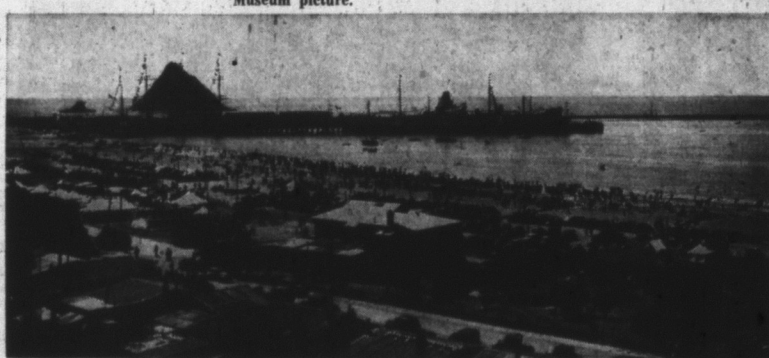


A SCENE from the greatest day Ngamotu Beach has ever known when, on March 31, 1941, more than 20,000 people packed the beach to watch the enactment of the landing of the first settlers from the William Bryan exactly 100 years earlier.—Taranaki Museum picture.

Rigby Allan, told me: "The breakwater (begun in 1881) gave New Plymouth Ngamotu Beach, so with the harbours board gradually taking it for harbour extensions, the people are losing nothing they had before."

Details of this will be described in the second article.

NEXT WEEK: Past sand buildup and future hopes.



CROWDS line Ngamotu Beach during the Christmas holidays of 1938. Mairi Gras sideshows can be seen on the left. The sailing ship in the background is the Kommodore Johnsen. This four-masted barque, which sailed under the German flag, was the largest sailing ship afloat at that time. It arrived at Port Taranaki to discharge guano from the Seychelle Islands on December 24 and sailed on January 19, 1939.



THIS aerial view of Ngamotu Beach, taken on a recent Saturday afternoon, shows how the area of the beach has shrunk under the eastward expansion of the port. It is hoped that sand will build up eastwards along the rocky foreshore from Bayly Rd (bottom left).