

An Abridged History of the Whanganui River

Historians have been studying history for as long as they can remember. Much of what they say is very accurate. The following potted history is more accurate than it seems.

Long, wide and slow flowing rivers have great difficulty avoiding interesting histories. This is what the Rhine, Nile and Whanganui Rivers have in common.

Mount Taranaki started the story when he fled from an enraged Tongariro, who was fairly upset over Taranaki's desires for his wife Pihanga. The trench he left as he headed to the coast filled with water and subsequently became an ideal site for a multisports event, amongst other things.

The tangata whenua were the first canoeists to start training on-site. The river teemed with lamprey and eels, and the riverbanks offered easily-defended sites for settlement. The kereru were fat and the water probably didn't need boiling. Aerobic paddling was in vogue.

The coming of the pakeha was the coming of change. One of the early white visitors to the river valley was Richard Taylor, a missionary whose equivalent today would be recognised by his hairy and well-developed calves, socks thick with hook grass and an aging Mountain Mule pack. He reached Pipiriki in the early 1840s. The settlement then consisted of 295 people, their whare and a chapel. It appears he was most impressed by the wooden hinge on the chapel door and as a result offered to supply windows, and a bell to replace the gun barrel they used as a call signal.

During his first short stay he married 16 people (to each other), gave an open air service to over 500 people from the region and then carried on up the river - marrying, censusing and probably promising more windows.



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Carbohydrate loading was introduced to the local training programme in the late 1840s, and by 1848 an estimated 30,000 acres of wheat was grown along the river by the Maori. Governor Grey, a renowned mountain biker of the day, offered financial assistance and several water-driven flour mills were built.

The remains of the Kaukore flour mill can be seen on the far side of the Kaukore stream just outside Pipiriki on the River Road. This mill processed the wheat grown on the flats immediately across the river, an area which is now regenerating into native bush. There's a track which follows the old mill race. If you get time, have a look.

War came to the Whanganui in the 1860s. The Hauhau, members of a religious cult, moved in

Resistance training was first achieved by the use of passengers.



Early support team on the 'Benares', 1911.

from Taranaki and won converts in the upper river. Their intent involved moving down-river, with their final goal the city of Wanganui.

During their travels downstream, the Hauhau were halted at Moutoa Island near Ranana during a battle with fellow Whanganui River Maori. The Hauhau retreated north to Ohautahi, now a reserve a few kilometres below Pipiriki, had a second battle, and then retired to Pipiriki to lay siege to the local garrison.

Major Brassey, the chap in charge of the Pipiriki garrison, was in trouble. Although they had plenty of rum, and each member of the militia received three tots per day, they were short of food and water. It was a case of water to the left of them, water to the right of them, and not many drops to drink, for the Hauhau were entrenched between the redoubts and the river. And at three tots per day, it's surprising the garrisons put up any resistance at all.

However, it appears they had some access to the water. Because telecommunications hadn't yet been privatised and were terribly inefficient, the defending battalions were forced to send their pleas in bottles. Fortunately they had plenty of rum bottles. The rum was replaced with messages written in Latin and in French ("Simus sine rebus belli satis" - we are without the things of war). The bottles were firmly corked, a feather stuck in the cork and, under the cover of darkness, they were thrown into the river. Don't worry - I doubt the rum was wasted.

It's hard to believe, but one of the rum bottles was retrieved below Wanganui by a surveyor, someone did interpret them, and reinforcements were sent in a steamer called the *Moutoa*. The cargo included 40 sheep - dinner on the hoof. Just before the arrival of these stores the Hauhau raised the siege and wandered away.

The steamer *Moutoa* took some time getting to Pipiriki, but it was the principle that was important and tourism was born.

In 1891, the firm of A. Hatrick and Co. began a regular steamer service to Pipiriki, and in 1903 extended the service to Taumarunui on the main trunk line.

The steamers delivered visitors to Pipiriki House, one of the most modern hotels in New Zealand. Unfortunately, as modern as the hotel was, it had no sprinkler system and burnt down in 1909 after 17 years of service. It was rebuilt immediately, and again the builders forgot the sprinklers. It lasted until 1959.

In 1904 A. Hatrick expanded the steamer business to include tourist accommodation. A 92 foot long houseboat, the *Makere*, was built in Taumarunui and floated down the river to a mooring at Maraekowhai. It was double decked, slept 36 people and offered such modern conveniences as hot showers and electric lights. It too had no sprinkler system and was completely destroyed by fire in 1933. At the time it was moored just inside the mouth of the Retaruke River.

While the tourist facilities near the river were steadily being consumed by fire, the local hills were being denuded by a process of cut and burn. It was soon noticed that this system of land management was causing severe erosion and a process of land reservation began.

A Whanganui River Trust was established in 1891 for the purpose of river maintenance and channel clearing to ease the passage of steamers. The Trust was responsible for convincing central Government that land management was necessary. Since then, management of reserve land has passed from the Whanganui River Reserves Board, in association with the Department of Lands and Survey (remember them - well-developed, hairy calfs, Mountain Mule packs and hook grass), to the Department of Conservation, who also look after the Whanganui National Park. A Whanganui River Maori Trust Board is active in taking care of iwi concerns.

Decreasing soil fertility, erosion, bush regeneration, a fall in prices for pastoral products and the depression of the 30s, plus problems of access, caused the gradual abandonment of many farm holdings.

In an attempt to maintain employment in the area, and to provide for future multisports events, the Whanganui River Road was constructed. But by 1940 this work petered out, the population of river-side villages declined and some disappeared completely. Despite the clear need for it, this pool of labour wasn't soaked up by the sprinkler system industry.

But there's a twist to this tale. The door was never closed on the Whanganui River. Although some of the water disappeared into the hydro-generation schemes of the Waikato River, the life-blood of the river never slowed. During the past ten years the tangata whenua have been fostering a Whanganui renaissance and Pipiriki is a good example of what's been going on. The local marae has recently been renovated and rebuilt, and new flats for kaumatua have been sited within the community. Orchards have been established in several villages along the river.

Over the last 1000 years or so, blood, sweat and tears have been poured into the Whanganui. Continuing the tradition, a few hundred multisport athletes are going to add to that pool over Labour Weekend.