An island apart

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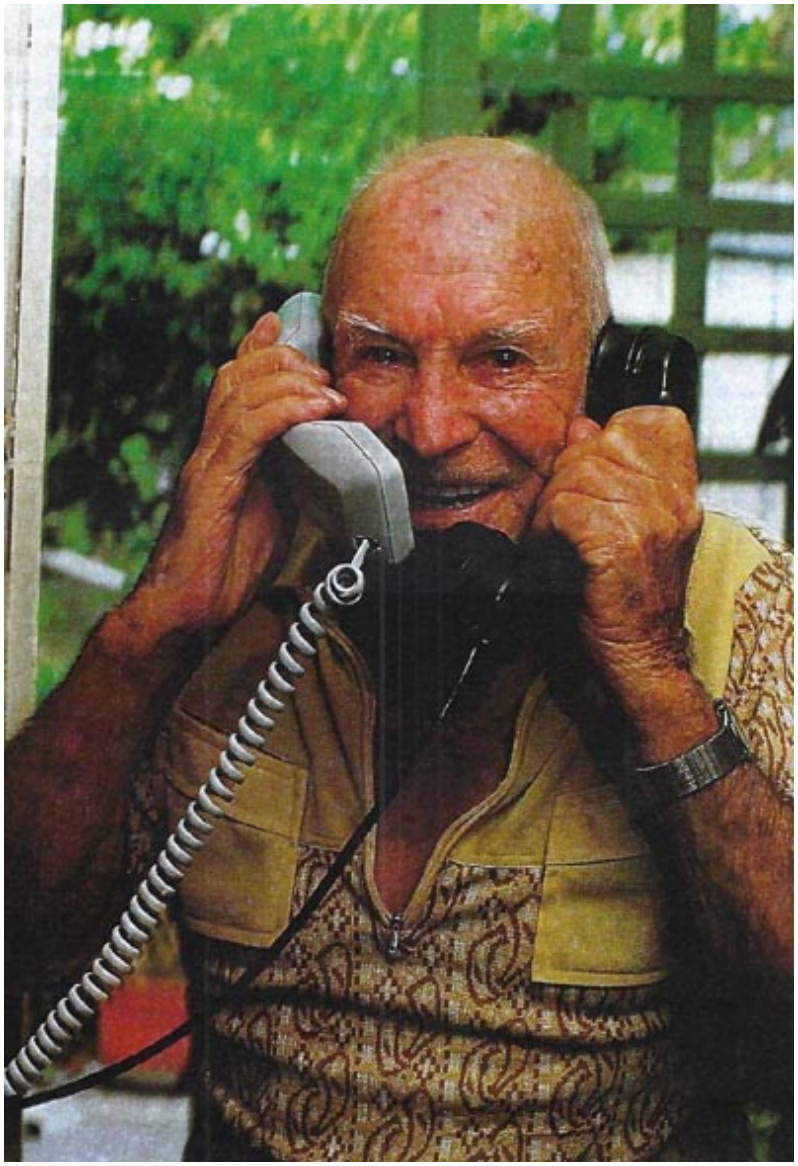
Through most of their long history, the people of Great Barrier have fought isolation and scratched out a hard-won livelihood. Now, fast boats and automatic telephones are threatening to change forever a diverse community shaped by its past.

Written by Vaughan Yarwood Photographed by Michael Schneider

The Maori called it Aotea, or ‘white cloud’, after an early canoe. James Cook, pragmatic Yorkshireman that he was, gave it a prosaic but equally apt label: Great Barrier. For, along with the much smaller Little Barrier, the 40-kilometre long Hauraki Gulf island is a bulwark against the energetic seas that arrive at Auckland’s gateway after an uninterrupted crossing from Chile…

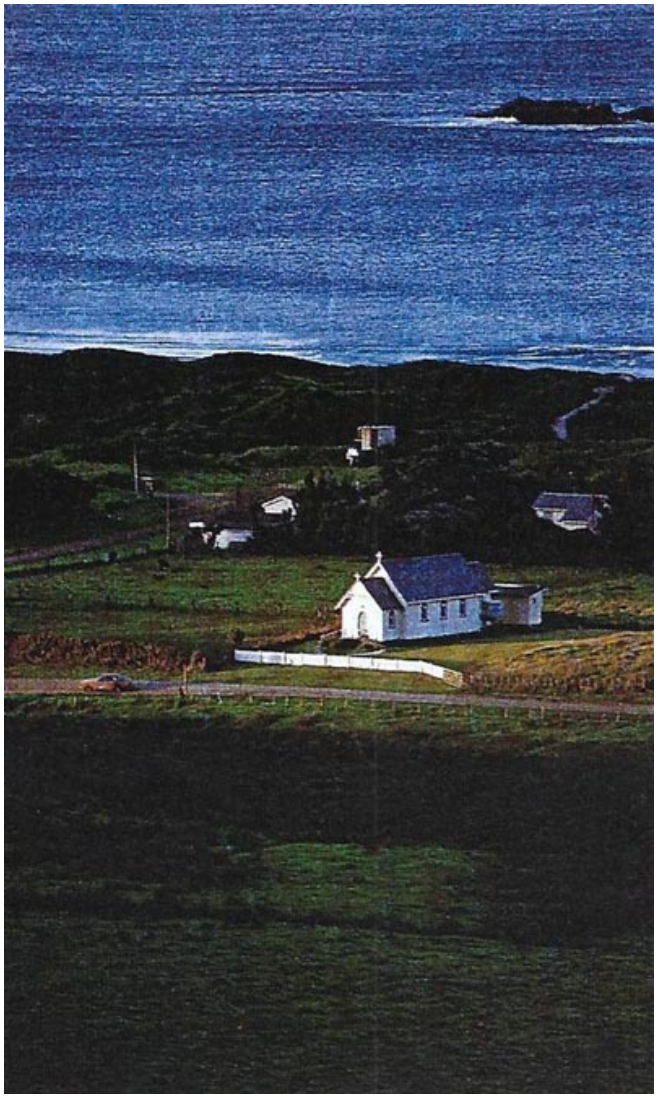
Great Barrier’s geography proclaims its natural function: the blond crescents of its east coast beaches shelving into the blue Pacific; its western inlets and deep water anchorages, in places reminiscent of the Marlborough Sounds, bush-clad and irregular. Sandwiched between the coasts rises a severe mountain backbone that, having plunged beneath the Colville Channel—and so turned it year round into a dangerous stretch of water—rises again to continue down the Coromandel Peninsula. The geomorphology is the same for both; so has been the effect on human settlement of the seams of gold and silver that stitch the mountains together.

These days though, the island is seen as an unspoiled paradise, an island retreat for jaded nine-to-fivers, floating in perpetual haze on the horizon a mere 90 kilometres north east of Auckland’s commercial glass heart. Over the long weeks of summer Barrier’s 900 or so locals endure upwards of 60,000 day trippers and short stay tourists. The island’s 100 guest house beds—there are no hotels—are booked solid. Camping grounds fill with designer tents, queuing at telephones and public toilets becomes an art form and it is almost possible to walk across the better endowed bays by stepping across moored yachts.



The introduction of an automatic telephone exchange has revolutionised communications on Great Barrier. While it has eliminated frustrating delays, many older residents, such as Bob Whistler (at 89, Barrier’s oldest resident) miss the comfort of the party line jangle.

Barrier, the pundits agree, is “going to go”, the way Waiheke, a Hauraki Gulf island-suburb, has “gone”. Bomb-like, in other words. Taxi-drivers are confident it is only a matter of time before the twentieth century arrives with a vengeance; so are tour operators and real estate agents. Even locals profess a gingery optimism about the tourist wave—provided it doesn’t end in a cultural wipeout. But then, it would be a mistake to imagine that consensus comes easily to the island. Call a dozen locals together to discuss anything, it can be claimed, and you will get thirteen opinions. Great Barrier is to pollsters what the Somme was to war.



Great Barrier's only church, at Medlands Beach, was shipped to the island by barge in 1987. It had previously been the Anglican Church at Awanui, near Kaitaia .

Sitting back with a seafood steak at Tipi and Bob's Holiday Home as the sun collapses into sea out beyond the harbour, or surrendering to a therapeutic hot spring bath in the foothills of Mt Hobson, Barrier can seem a timeless world. Indeed, outwardly, the pace is slow.

There is always room enough for conversation, for mulling over the behaviour of birds, or fish, or neighbours. For skipping pebbles. 'Barrier time' is an almost palpable phenomenon.

Yet to think of Barrier life as easy would be a second mistake. The island has always exacted a harsh price for tenure. The early families who tried so forcefully to inhabit it have carved their names into the very fabric of its history. Medland, Bailey, Blackwell, Osborne, Taylor, Cooper (to name a few)—branches of the founding dynasties have spread almost as completely as the scrub which is now closing over countless hectares of hard-won pasture. The furniture heirlooms of descendants bear sling scars from the scows that delivered their forebears to the promised land.

A few kilometres before the loose metal road from Tryphena Harbour reaches Claris, the island's one-store administrative hub, it drifts past a large shed announcing 'Les Blackwell Ltd, general carriers' and displaying a phone number: 1R Claris. Opposite, concealed behind a grassed dune, stands the Blackwell home.

Les, a fourth generation islander, exudes a deep connection with the land. His great-grandfather George Blackwell emigrated from Tipperary in 1865 and, after a false start, settled in Tryphena. Whenever the supply ship from Auckland arrived he would mount his white bull and travel the bridle path to a ridge overlooking Oruawharo Bay. There he would send blasts from a cow's horn down the valley as a signal, and leave mail for the Medlands, the first European settlers on that coast, under a rock. With his wooden leg secured by leather harness, and his singular vocation, he could have been straight from the baroque pages of Mervyn Peake.

Don Milne, one of a handful of Barrier crayfishermen, works the less exposed western side of the island.

Don calls in to visit Neil Darroch, who lives in a floating house in a bay at Kaikoura Island.

Les' wife Beverley is from another Barrier family, the Sandersons. Her great grandfather was the first to find silver on the island—silver she still has in the form of an intricately crafted bracelet. "Mum used to make aprons and sheets out of 1001b flour bags," says Les as he urges his Ford truck into a bend, his voice jarred by runnels in the road. He gestures to the load behind the cab: "Now people do the opposite. Everything's brought in. All that regularly leaves the island are empty gas cylinders from the stores and empty beer kegs from the clubs". The golf club, the boating club, the Barrier Social Club and the newly finished sports club are the closest Barrier comes to pubs. Les, who rules over a garden that seems able to produce things at will, is dismayed at the Barrier's increasing dependence on the mainland.

He remembers the days of the weekly steamer, when it seemed that everyone milked cows for a living—even though, by the time the cream reached market, fermentation had invariably degraded it. Says Bev of the changes: "One day green dairy pastures were everywhere. The next day subdivisions had gone in and people had changed to drystock." The trend was less prevalent to the north, but from the Blackwell's lawn rows of surveyed plots can be seen following the curve of Kaitoke Beach.

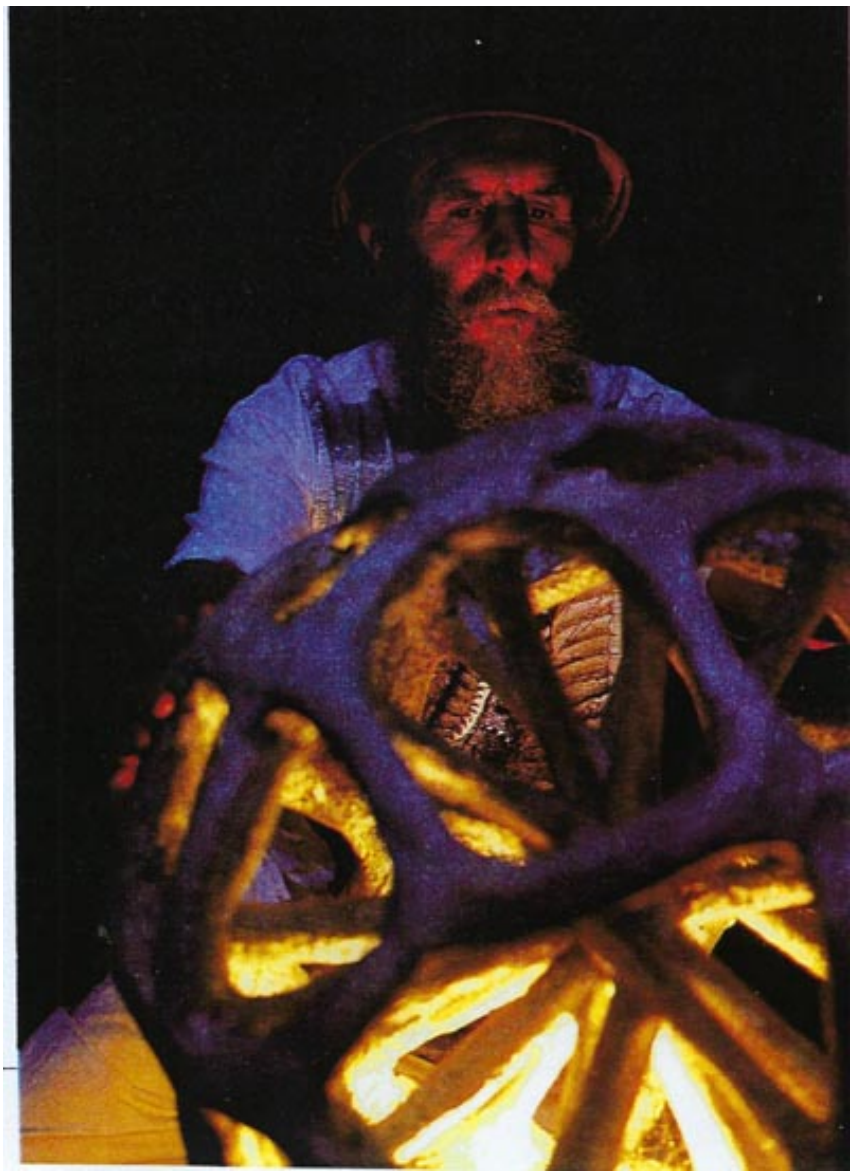
David Palmer, chairman of the community board and himself a sixth generation islander, is something of a prophet in the wilderness when it comes to development. Existing subdivisions, if developed, could swell the island's population sixfold, he says.

"People look at the hills and just see trees. They don't see the survey grids drawn all over them. Whatever a person is doing, they should imagine another six people next to them doing the same thing—that's what development amounts to." David claims he is getting involved for the sake of his children, trying to steer development in the right direction. "Not organising toilets and rubbish collections won't stop the tourists coining, he says. But he believes there is still time to get things right. "There's talk of Barrier taking off, but Fitzroy was once a lot more heavily populated than it is

than it is now." And David should know. He runs Fitzroy House, a guest establishment, and one of the oldest homesteads on the island.

His nearest neighbours, Connie and Terry Quirk, arrived on Barrier three years ago to take over the Fitzroy general store, and to escape what they consider the encroachment of city life on their once sleepy hollow: Waiheke Island. Terry believes development will not be as encompassing as on Waiheke because of the Department of Conservation's strong presence on Barrier. The department has jurisdiction over some 28,000ha—more than half the island, most of it in the north.

In his short time at Fitzroy Terry, a born fossicker, has amassed a small museum of detritus from the past. Hats of all descriptions, barnacle encrusted fishing floats, a china cup complete with Victorian whisker guard, any number of bottles. Most of his basement collection has been garnered from below high tide.

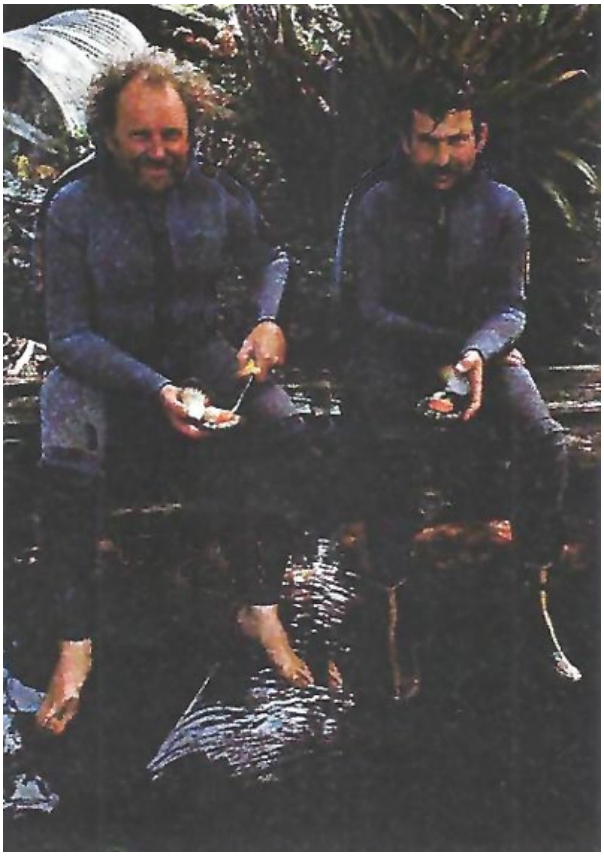


A walk through Terry's world, basking in sunlight but subjected to the thumping of a generator for the store freezers, reveals the soul of a playful artist. A mobile of crayfish skeletons dangles from the ceiling; brightly painted boots stand beside schooners and galleons made from the bones of snapper. Outside, totemic fern tree masks with paua eyes guard paths and hedges. And in the park stand two metre-high sculptures he built from salvaged car windows, quarter vents and lights. One doubles as a birdbath. Few people, least of all puzzled Japanese couples, can walk by without reaching for a camera.

For Terry Quirk the Barrier offers tranquillity and "a saner way of life". Terry and his wife run the store at Port Fitzroy, where he finds ample time to express his more creative instincts through sculpture.

"I feel close to nature here," says Terry. "There are rails in the garden, wild pigs across the road, brown teal ducks foraging around the kitchen. Down by the wharf the other night I saw dolphins—a mother and babies. You got the idea there was some sort of instruction going on. It was all very deliberate."

The Quirks don't drive the 35 kilometres to Tryphena often—an expedition they regard as fairly major. The main stimulus is when the airstrip at neighbouring Okiwi is closed, which can be for a month at a time. Then they force themselves over the rough hills to fetch the papers.



It is as though the island had been fitted to a centrifuge and spun wildly, flinging people either up to Fitzroy and Okiwi, or down towards Claris and the much larger settlement at Tryphena. Though local traffic in the south can, by Barrier standards, verge on rush hour, gaps between cars on the northbound road can stretch to an hour or more.

"If they blew that road up we could survive very well here," says David Palmer laconically. In the early days, claims Okupu builder Bob Ebermayer, a drive north to Fitzroy involved opening five or more gates slung across the road. Back then, he says, entire families would come out to watch a car go past. Though well-versed in the local lore, Bob, a six-foot Californian sporting the almost mandatory bushman's beard, arrived too late to experience it first hand.

Great Barrier has always been synonymous with the bounty of the sea. Below: Tom Harrison uses an old clothes drier to smoke snapper. Above: Guy Warwick (right) and Ray Toomey sample their scallop catch.

What he and his wife Sandra do have an intimate knowledge of is isolation. They live, with daughter Narisa and nine-month-old son Trent, in a roadless valley leading down to Allom Bay. The fifteen-minute row across Blind Bay to the parked vehicle have given him what would elsewhere be a gym-hardened physique. The journey was a daily routine while he laboured on the islands nearby sports club: an impressive big-beamed building built from local timbers.

Now, as with an earlier school construction job and alterations to the island's naval research station, work has come to an end. "To survive here you have to be able to go without work and without money for long periods. It's as simple as that," he says flatly.

The Ebermayers have been on the Barrier for five years. The story they tell is of unintended drifting, of accidental discovery and finally of deep attachment to the island. It is a pattern repeated in the lives of many residents.

For some families things haven't changed much from settler days. Rachel Paine takes a loaf of bread out of the wood-fired range.

“I was headed for Australia in 1972. Friends had 400 acres up Fitzroy end, so I dropped in to see them,” says Bob. “Barrier seemed a good place to live. Water easy to come by, surfing good. Land one hundred dollars an acre. It was a chance to own coastal property.”

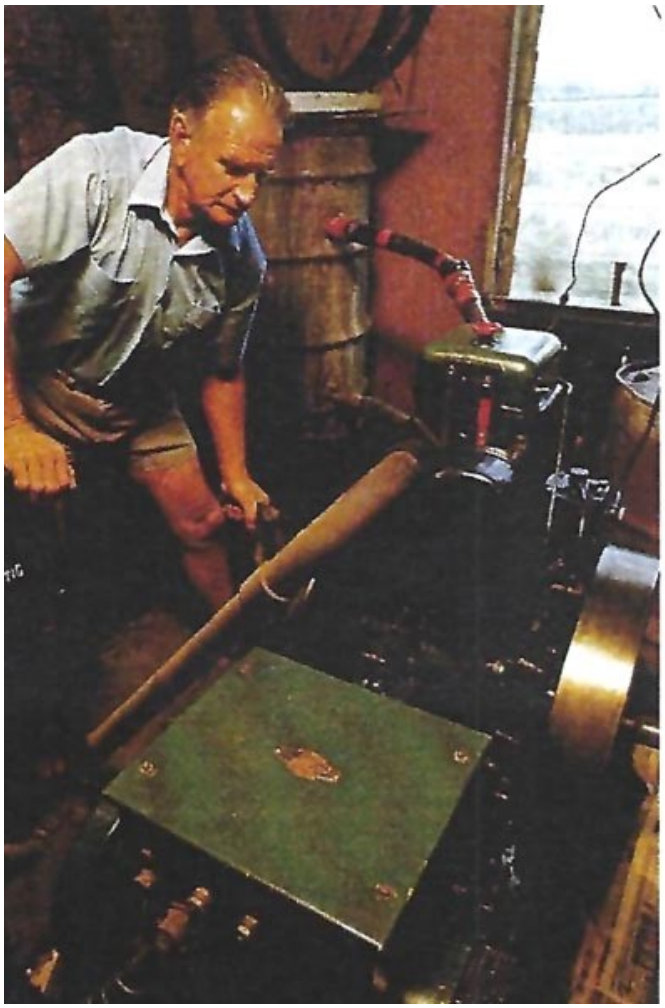
In 1974 he took the plunge. With eleven partners he bought 286 acres and set about accumulating survival money and building materials. It was a slow process.

When the Ebermayers arrived, only a little modern machinery distanced them from the gruelling hardship of earlier settlers. The homeload of building materials, shipped across on the scow *Te Aroha,* was off-loaded by hand and dragged up the river valley with a spike-wheeled tractor. Now the track they forced through the bush has contracted to a mere path, and the modern deck-fringed house sits comfortably in its clearing—a shard of suburbia that gives every sign of having been airlifted in.

As with everything else, housing on the island is expensive. Freight charges, septic tanks, water tanks and power generators, as well as the need to run phone lines in over rugged country, add 20 per cent and more to city building costs.

None of the Ebermayers’ foreign co-owners have shown an inclination to forsake civilisation and join their Thoreau-like experiment.

When Bob first arrived, self-sufficiency ruled. The island had no mechanics—”either you were your own mechanic or you didn’t run machines”. The local store was a room in someone’s house, and the bread arrived by plane once a week. If you weren’t liked, he adds, life could be hard.

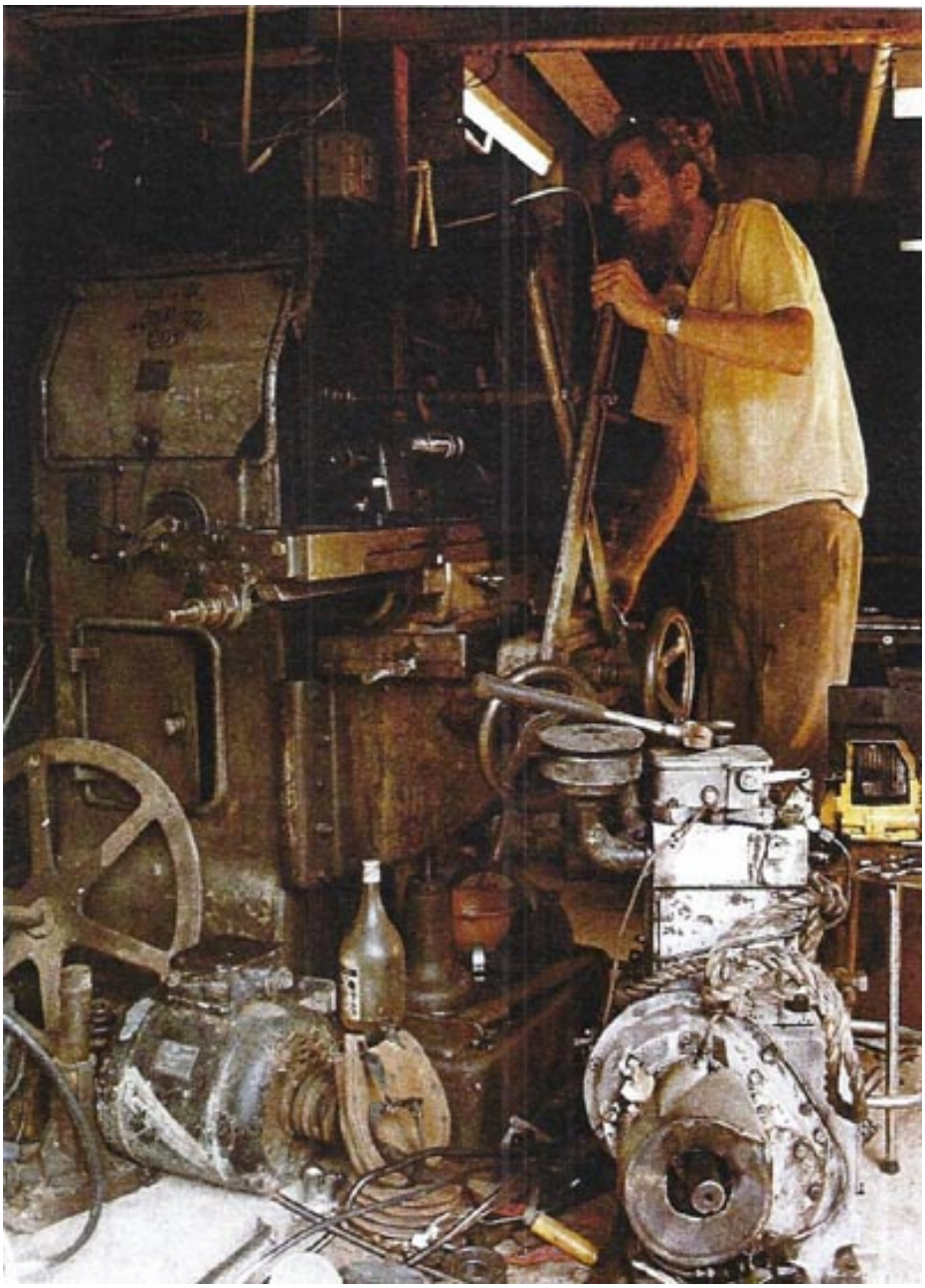


“We lived under a piece of plastic for six months. I would walk miles through the bush just to get a bottle of wine.” He smiles. “We were young then.”

Trent was born off the island, in Rotorua, the home town of Sandra’s parents. The alternative, before the new medical centre went up in Claris, was a home birth. It was not something Sandra could countenance, given her isolation. “It’s good to get off the island anyway—to have a break, and to remind yourself of why you’re here,” she says.

Shore-leave from the island, with its reputation for year-round rain, can become a psychological necessity. In midwinter, when travel difficulty and a curtain of rain close off the land, isolation is accentuated. “Last July I kept thinking how good it would be to put Trent in a car with a pushchair and go shopping,” she confesses.

Because there is no reticulated electricity, life on Great Barrier revolves around generators. Les Blackwell’s pride and joy is a 1935 Lister still in perfect running order.



Dependence on machinery and the necessity of coping with breakdowns has made skilled mechanics of many Barrier residents. Peter Hazard's workshop (right) is an engineer's treasure trove.

A while back they did swap sylvan calm for the abandon of a city spree. "We lived in a hotel and just went crazy for two days." A friend went one better, says Sandra. "He has a wharf and he got into mail order. He was shopping internationally from the bush." The momentary surrender to urban enthusiasms is a reminder that the island gives no quarter.

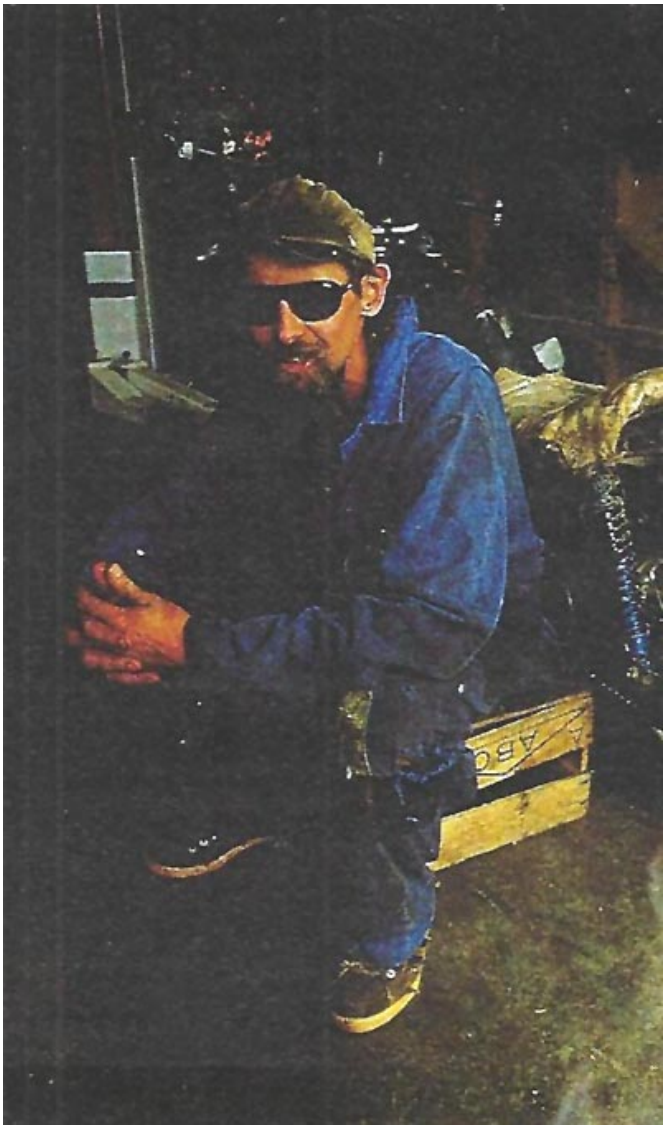
"No mains power, no water. We live in what would elsewhere be called a state of emergency," says mechanic Bruce Marx as he wedges himself under a bonnet. He is patiently soldering a carburettor's idle mixture screw.

"Lightweight modern cars don't suit the roads here," he says dismissively. "They're not made for labouring through the loose metal." Bruce owns a well-seasoned Morris Eight—"eight restless horsepower", he quips. Its vertical exhaust pipe, which rises tractor-like from the bonnet, gives it away as a Barrier car. Two hundred dollar's worth of tyres, he says, has doubled its value. Patched and repaired, lacking a unifying colour scheme, its seats not much more than a network of springs, it nevertheless tackles the terrain with a throaty verve. "Three years ago I gave it a valve grind. Last week I tuned it. Apart from that…" he shrugs. No worries.

Bruce, who grinningly claims descent from Karl Marx "through an illegitimate son", has theories as bold as those of his alleged ancestor, though they revolve around cars rather than communism. It would indeed be hard to find anyone on the island who didn't have strong feelings about the internal combustion engine. Henry Ford is a more appropriate candidate for a statue in Tryphena than Marx ever was in Eastern Europe.

The island has a long tradition of beekeeping and is particularly known for its pohutukawa honey and other blends of bush flowers.

Watching Les Blackwell's Oldsmobile—"it's the closest I could get to a Chevy for the price"—ghost along the Claris flat under a sky peppered with stars, headlights knifing through the darkness, is better than a scene from *Close Encounters.* It's the sort of image that sparked off Cargo Cults in Papua New Guinea. A piece of space age gliding through paradise.



Bruce Marx, Claris mechanic and part-time furniture maker: "There's plenty of work on Barrier if you have hands ad can use them."

Not that paradise is easy on technology, even on the robust stuff close to Bruce Marx's heart. Fern-clad gullies are the resting place of all manner of vehicles, from war-vintage saloons to four-wheel drive landrovers. Some are coaxed over a bank by owners and forgotten, others sit out rain-soaked days officially "waiting for spares". But Barrier follows the natural economy of nature. Nothing is wasted.

"Half the lights for my house came from tail lights," says Bruce. "They're 25-watt, so they don't drain batteries. Cars at the Claris tip are fair game for cannibalism."

Bruce has even found a use for offcuts from his chainsaw mill. Any timber not suitable for his new house is transformed into quirky outdoor furniture. He points to a piece in the workshop, on which a forlorn lawnmower rests. It is rickety, but better, he says, than earlier efforts. "People who come to the island for a holiday need barbecue furniture. Here it is. At the end of the barbecue you can burn it!"

Conversation catches again on the condition of the island's roads. It's a problem his work brings him back to time and again. "There's a lot of salt in the dust. If the roads were sealed, running costs would be a fifth of what they are." But surprisingly, he is happy to see them remain unsealed. The logic? Better roads mean higher speeds, Bruce contends, and a dramatic rise in the number of accidents. As it is, he says, most are caused by visitors unaccustomed to loose metal. "A woman hired a Holden from here a while back. She'd only gone a kilometre when she lost it—and she was still on the straight."

Islanders currently enjoy a Warrant of Fitness exemption, though their vehicles must be up to WOF standard. All that is about to change, though, as the tide of officialdom rises. Bruce is adamant that bureaucratic high-handedness should be resisted. "They've no right to demand a WOF with roads like this. Whenever you drive, it's like someone smashing away under the car with a five pound hammer," he contends. "There's bound to be a bulb somewhere that doesn't work."

Such bellicose talk is appropriate on an island where locals like to live by their own rules. It was, after all, for many years home to Al Capone's reputedly bullet-damaged Chrysler Imperial. But Barrier's sole police officer, senior constable Shane Godinet, says change is going to come.

"Kids are the life blood of this place," says Sane Godinet, the island's sole-charge police officer, pictured with six-year-old so Hayden.

Shane, a solidly built Samoan with a thick jet black moustache, took up his sole charge posting, after a 15- year city stint, the day of the 1988 Fiji coup. Hence his nickname: Colonel Rabuka. "We are both good-looking and we both have our own islands," he explains jokingly.

The Auckland drug squad launched a helicopter campaign within days of his arrival that netted $400,000 worth of Barrier cannabis. It did nothing for community relations, but hard work and understanding eventually won Shane the high ground of public opinion.

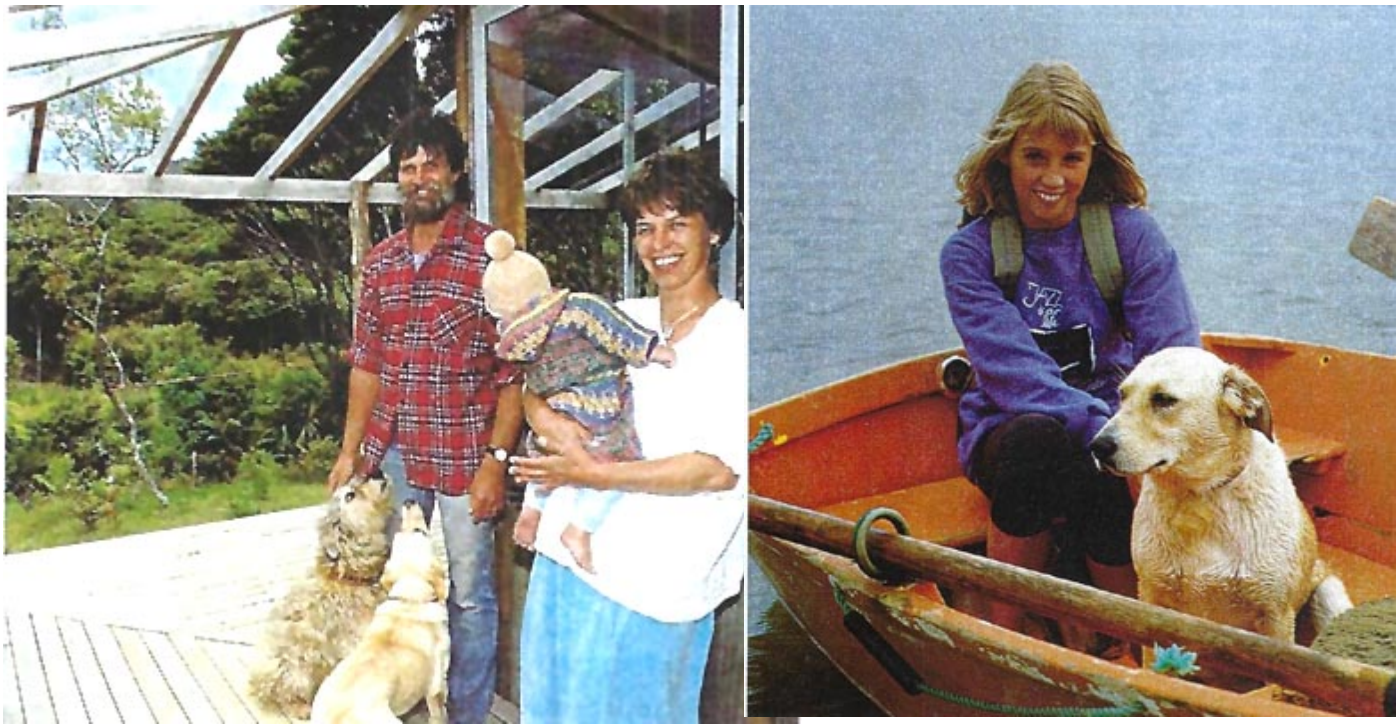
"When I arrived I bought a boat, thinking I'd go fishing once a week. I went out twice last year," he says. "I even joined a book club. Now I have 40 unread books." Shane confesses he has yet to see tourist meccas like Mt Hobson and the hot water springs. "I'll have to leave and come back as a visitor to do that."

The first few weeks were an ordeal by fire, he recalls, working 8am to 5pm with the drug squad, then catching up on his own work until around 11 at night. The pace still heats up when, as recently happened, Ministry of Transport officers arrive to enforce a crackdown on vehicle safety. So does the flame of local resentment.

Shane says he has never known such parochialism. But he claims Barrier is a great place to work—the rivalry and pettiness disappears the moment someone needs a hand.

“Barrier and the Chathams are unique in New Zealand policing, but I couldn’t do the work without my wife. If I’m out on a call, Teresa’s my only backup—she’s the unpaid second policeman.”

There have been worrying moments when Teresa has lost contact with her husband on a night call-out. But Shane’s major concern after dark is avoiding getting lost. With no street lighting and with houses nestled on cliffs or at the end of a half-hour bush walk, he says orientation problems are chronic.



Bob and Sandra Ebermayer have created their home in a roadless river valley in Blind Bay and 11 year old Narisa waits for her dad to row her across the bay to the school bus.

Policing in such a tight-knit community has one other drawback. “If I made a blue at one end of the island the news would beat me back home. You live in a glasshouse here.”

By way of compensation, life on the borderless beat is ever changing. Shane doubles as island bailiff, fisheries officer, traffic and probation officer, converting his police landrover into an ambulance, tow truck, dog pound or hearse as needed. Homicide is virtually unknown on Barrier. The only murder happened 100 years ago and lives on more as a swashbuckling footnote to tourism brochures than as a cautionary tale.

It is an unlikely story. Glass-eyed Charles Caffrey, captain of the scow *Sovereign of the Seas,* fell for a Tryphena woman with a silken voice, named Elizabeth Taylor. It is said that Caffrey, undoubtedly unbalanced, bought a map of the Peruvian coast from an Auckland bookseller and arrived in Tryphena one day in late 1886 flying the Jolly Roger and firing a pistol. Also aboard were Caffrey’s mate Henry Penn and Penn’s girl, a 15-year-old prostitute named Grace Cleary. Anchor was dropped and Elizabeth wrested from her home. In the bungled abduction her father was shot and killed. Three months later

the villains were discovered in New South Wales and brought back to Auckland, where Caffrey and Penn were hanged.

These days the island lacks even commercial pirates. Radio Hauraki, which often broadcast illegally from local waters in the 1960s, is now part of the Auckland establishment. Tryphena fisherman the late Bill Gibbs no longer defies the authorities to get air-dropped tapes and supplies out to the rebels, and violence on the island is rare—less of a worry than burglary and drunkenness.

In a recent road blitz involving Ministry of Transport officers, two thirds of drivers stopped were over the limit. The exercise was aimed at preparing locals for enforcement of drink-driving laws. "I don't ever want to see hotels on Barrier," says Shane. "At least the sports clubs tend to be self-policing. There was a good reaction to the breathalysers we left there."

Twenty-five years of beachcombing on Great Barrier have resulted in some surprising finds for Bob Harrison. Two paddles, found on separate occasions bear designs which place their origin somewhere near the Marquesas Islands. Perhaps, suggests Bob, they drifted across the Pacific on the same currents used by the early Maori navigators.

Drugs, an equally ugly side of twentieth century life, are harder to combat. “We’ve had everything from cocaine and LSD to heroin and homebake out here in the last year,” says Shane. More than three million dollars’ worth of marijuana has been seized since his appointment, mostly the work of “bush gardeners” from Auckland. If they all donated just ten per cent of their takings, he says, the island would be rich. Barrier’s legitimate farmers do less well.

At the end of an eroded track that winds steeply down into the catchment of Rosalie Bay Swiss horticulturalist Peter Speck ekes out a living from heavy clay soil. In ten determined years he has raised 350 macadamia trees—once hailed as Barrier’s miracle crop—along with apple, pear, peach, citrus, apricot and almond. The trees, planted in a labyrinth of clearings cut among the sheltering scrub, take up most of Peter’s day. Pheasants nest in the liberal mulch and ripe compost sweats in the late-morning sun as he works. Ducks float languidly on a small artificial lake. In the lower distance lies the hammered surface of the Colville Channel. The panorama offers much, but underfoot the stubborn earth delivers little. His last holiday was in 1985.

Remains of the Sanderson family’s stone dairy, built in 1864, are still to be found in the bush near Okupu.

An early attempt at market gardening didn’t pay. Two thousand hours of toil resulted in a meagre dollar-an-hour reward. Peter, who confesses to being “a bit of an extremist”, shies away from sprays. It is an aversion he picked up along with toxin-induced illness while working in a Swiss glasshouse. “We are taught that if we have a problem the solution is to kill it. I was shocked at the number of sprays used here that are banned in Europe.” Peter, a disciple of educationalist Rudolph Steiner, is committed to biodynamic farming. Even the farm’s name, Benthorne, refers to the cowhorn, a major ingredient in biodynamic preparations.

One of the greatest difficulties on Barrier, he says, is the shortage of equipment, and of farmers to share it with. Like most islanders, his workshop, with its impressive inventory of tools and spares, is an essay in autonomy.

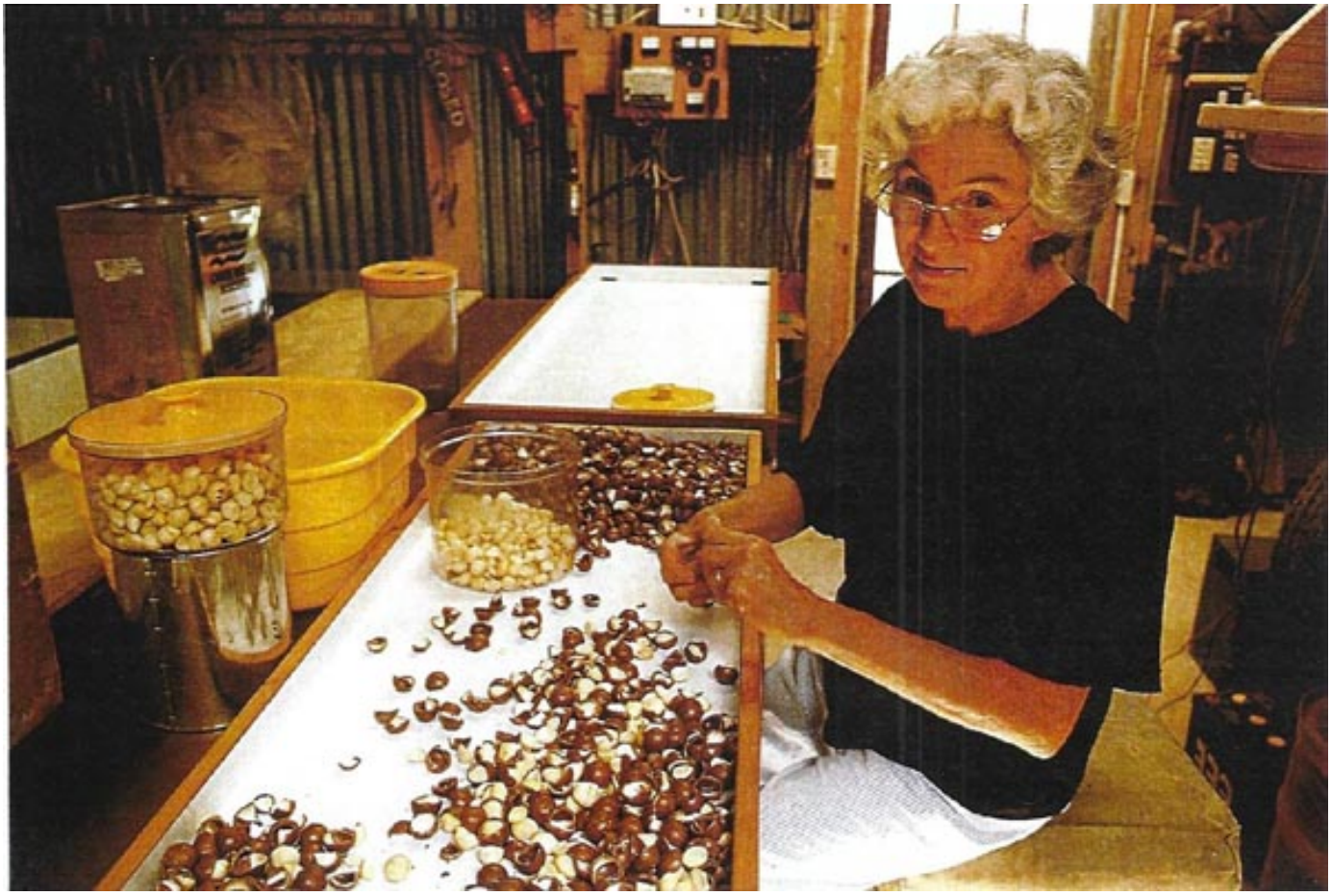
Rosalie Bay is something of a Swiss valley in miniature, with four Swiss families in calling distance. A few months back, neighbours Pedro and Martina Tschirky were married, riding into the valley on a 3/4 Clydesdale draughthorse for the ceremony.

Occasionally, students and others drawn to Peter’s work provide social stimulation. He met his German wife Helga that way. Now, with two children, they are concerned for the future.

Benthorne's land value has risen $50,000 in the past ten years, despite a depressed economy, and rates have jumped to over $1000 a year. The couple's subsidised water rights contract with the National Water and Soil Authority, which had seven years to run, was cancelled under local body amalgamation. Full fee charging could be enough to send people like the Specks under.

"They don't even come out to look at conditions here, they just send a computer printout," says Peter. "It's easy for them to alter figures, but how are we supposed to generate income with bad soil and high freight costs?" With no mains electricity and more than a kilometre of road to maintain up to the ridge, he sees little spin-off from ten years of ratepaying.

The crunch for Peter and Helga will come, as it comes for all the island's families, when the children reach secondary school age. Correspondence is then the only alternative to boarding school on the mainland. The education dilemma has stimulated plans for a proposed area school, though some are adamant that island education will merely prolong insularity.



Joan Fergus and her husband grow macadamia nuts, a horticultural crop which thrives in the island's possum-free hills.

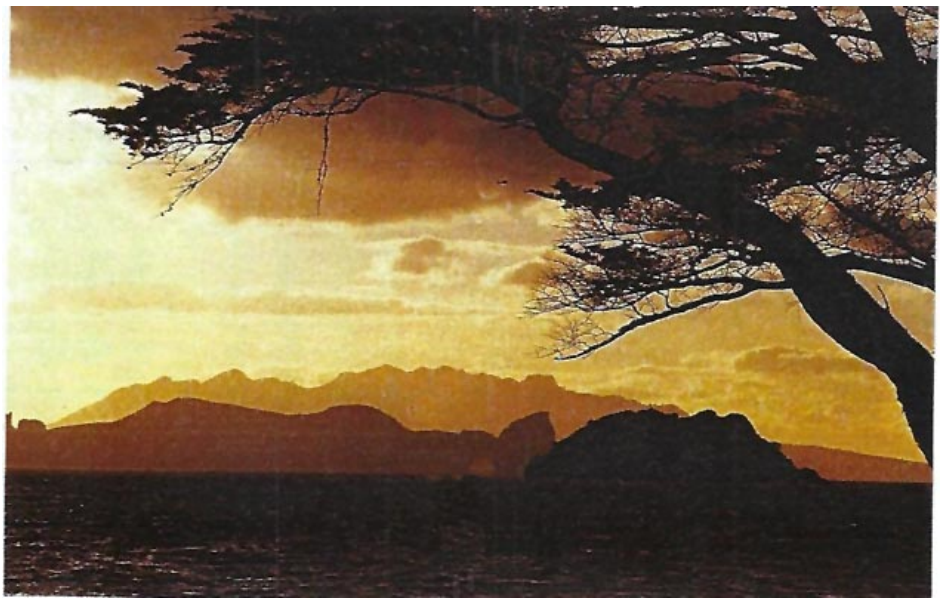
Joan and Basil Fergus, who retired to Barrier fourteen years ago, when its population was barely 400, have also witnessed the downside of bureaucracy: licenses to light fires, a limit on the number of chickens that can be kept, restrictions on where cars can be left, a ban on kerosene heaters. And with the regulations have come other city preoccupations: conspicuous consumption and a chasing of the dollar. Aucklanders can now catch a high speed 300-seat catamaran to the island for a day's fishing, or even fly in for a meal. There is talk that the new owners of Kaikoura Island, which stands at the entrance to Fitzroy, have plans for an international casino there.

Basil, a former anaesthetist on the team of renowned New Zealand heart surgeon Sir Brian Barratt-Boyes, says people can no longer come to the island and support a mortgage. “There’s nothing coming off the island, just a few sheep being demolished by dogs. A lot of land is no longer being worked.”

The couple saw promise years ago in macadamias, and tried to develop the crop to help strengthen Barrier’s economy. To date they have planted around 700 trees on their 20-acre Tryphena property, and raised countless seedlings for sale. Basil improvised a grader from a washing machine engine, plastic plumbing and a bicycle chain to sort the sweet nuts. Nearby sits an intricate drying machine driven by old car engine fans. The resulting roasted and chocolate-coated confectionery is labour intensive and, the Ferguses imply, less rewarding than it could be. It also diverts Joan from her easel and eats into the time Basil can spend restoring the ancient launch that sits in his hangar-like shed.

They talk now of processing nuts imported from Australian plantations, where macadamia trees are grown in their thousands—an admission, perhaps, that yet another window of opportunity has closed on the island. With nut packaging over for the season, Basil can again indulge in early morning rendezvous with ex-SAS fisherman Murray Staples, whose mooring is visible from the Ferguses’ waterside verandah.

Fishery licensing is making a difference, says Murray, but fishermen are still having a hard time in the depleted waters. Trawlers often come close inshore at night, much to the islanders’ ire. Shots have been fired at boats, and car bodies dumped in the sea to discourage the practice. Rumour has it that one dumbfounded fisherman dragged up his own vehicle in the nets at Okupu.



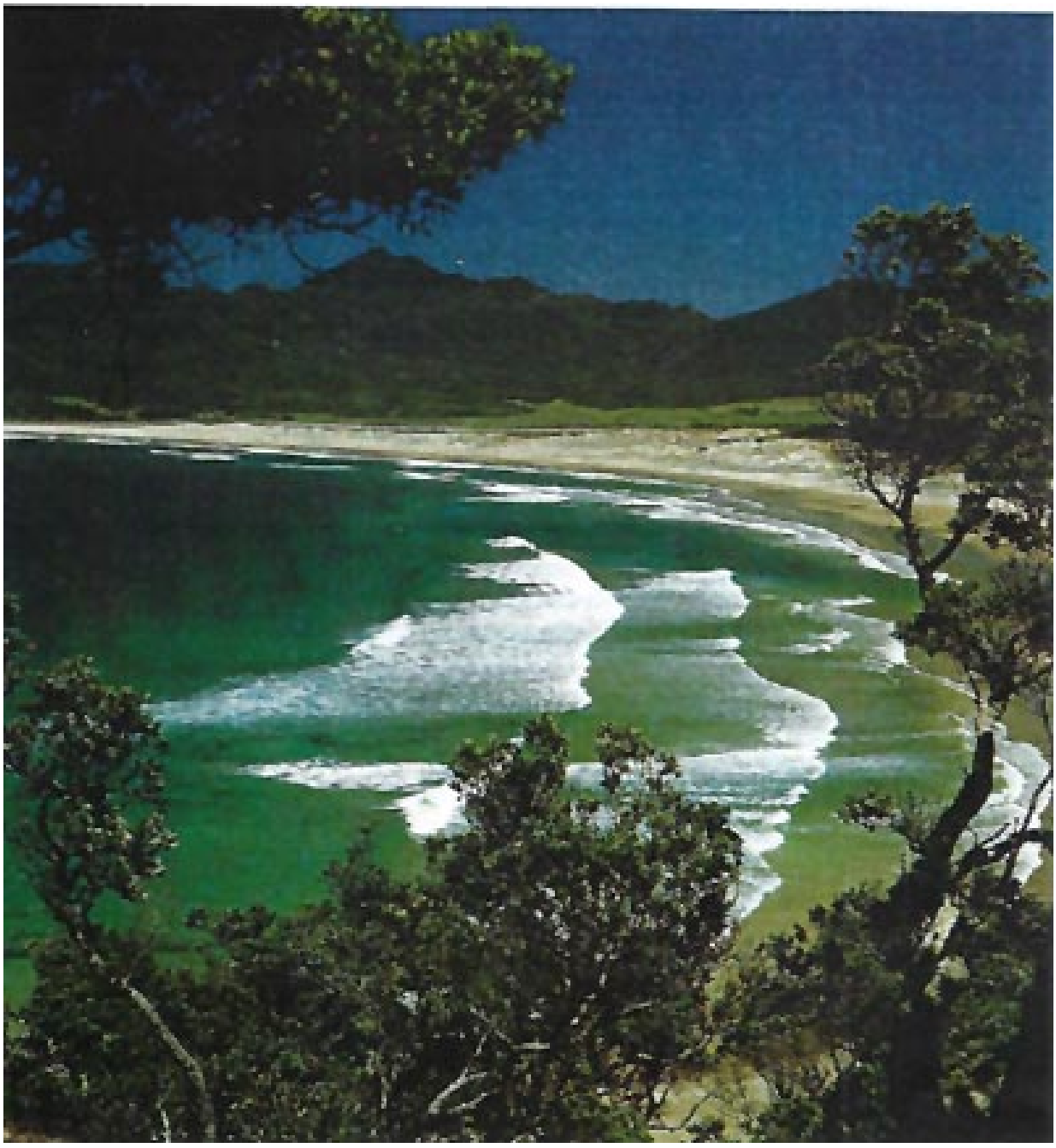
Layered headlands fade into the horizon beyond Karaka Bay.

Until the cartage business came his way, Les Blackwell pursued one of the islands less controversial occupations: beekeeping. He was continuing a long family tradition—great-grandfather George Blackwell was possibly the first person in the country to raise bees. In the 1880s the island supported 1000 hives populated by imported Italian bees. These were more docile than the vicious English ‘black bees’ which were brought to New Zealand by missionaries in 1839, and which rapidly became established on the island. The Blackwell honey house was built in the early 1880s, and in 1895 10 tons of honey was canned in six weeks, most of it shipped to England. Pohutukawa honey from Barrier was so sought after, claims Les, that it found its way to King George V’s table.

A survey, carried out when Les had the only hives on the island, suggested Barrier could support 86,000 hives—a figure nowhere near being realised yet, despite growing interest in beekeeping.

In the 1960s and 1970s, before regulations stipulated stainless steel tanks and other paraphernalia, Les refined honey and rolled out foundation wax using ancestor George’s equipment. In their most productive year Les and Bev processed 12 tonnes of honey, some originating from a South African plant known locally as the green weed.

Les points out from his cab the adaptable plant's progress as it colonises the Barrier countryside. "It was imported by the Osbornes before the turn of the century," he says. "Gives a pure white honey around November, December."



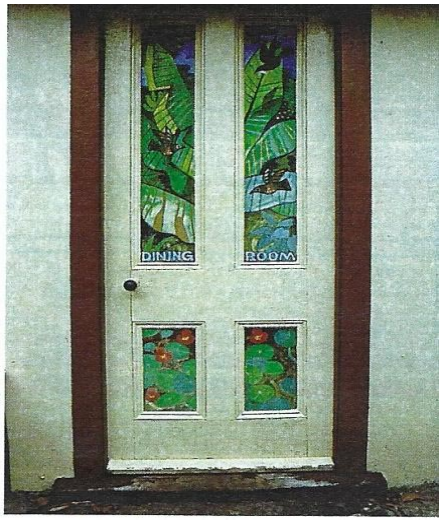
Deserted white sand beaches, clear water and, in an easterly, big surf are features of the island's eastern coastline. This is Whangapoua, the northern most beach.

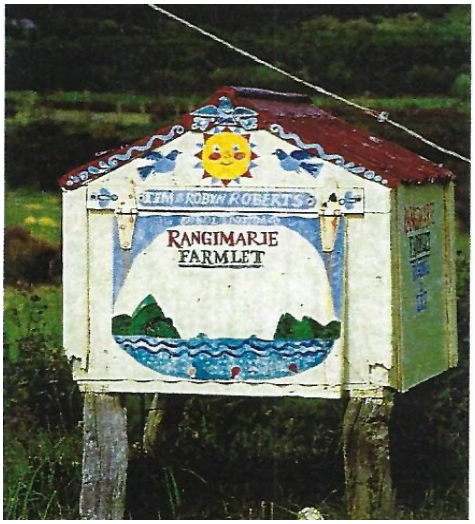
It is one of the island's more unusual success stories. Other locals have staked their money on babacos and a new timber tree from China, the empress tree *(Paulownia).* "It grows more than a metre in its first year," says advocate Murdoch King. "You can't go wrong."

Generating a living is one of Barrier's challenges; generating power is another. With no mains power on the island, and little interest in a commercial scheme to sell expensive reticulated electricity, houses are festooned with windmills, solar cells, deep cycle batteries, gravity pumps and generators. "One way to annoy your neighbours is to build your generator shed out of iron," remarks one local.

The shortage of power has inverted domestic timetables the length and breadth of the island. Washing, drying and vacuuming are done when the generators run—at night. In houses with dubious supply, evening reading can be a gloomy affair.

Few residents would have equipment to equal the museum piece Les Blackwell runs: a 1935 Lister bought from a Huntly Power Station electrician for 10 cents, and originally destined for an Okupu bach. “He put a price on it so the deal was legal and I wouldn’t sue him if it blew up in my face,” says Les. Ticking along at a third the revs of modern generators, it puts out 2.5 kilowatts and runs for eight hours on a gallon of diesel.





Barrier has no hotels, but boasts a number of idiosyncratic guest houses. Rangimarie, at Medlands Beach, offers freshly baked bread, home grown vegetables and milk from the family cow. Tim Roberts (top next page) looks after the gardens in front of the house. The artwork on letter-box, chimney and various doors was the work of a local painter.

Drinking water and irrigation needs on the island have resulted in a spaghetti of plastic conduits. If gravity was ever cut off, says an orchid grower, Barrier would be left hanging by its polythene pipes.

Or by its antiquated telephone lines.

Until this year crank handle telephones and a Morse code jangling of bells were the norm on Barrier, bastion of the country's last manual exchange. The era of party lines has gradually been phased out by a new solar-powered system. For a time during the changeover it was possible, of an evening, to ring anywhere in the world from Medlands Beach—except Tryphena, just over the ridge.

Sue Daly, who took over the Claris exchange in 1987, says she was everyone's secretary before the lines went automatic. "Someone would call and say 'I'm out to the beach, could you take any important calls'. If the district nurse was on her way back to Fitzroy and was needed, I'd ring someone up the line and get her flagged down." The exchange closed down from 12 noon to 1pm and again in the evening. "People would pay extra after seven at night, but I'd keep it open till the calls died off," says Sue, who took over from her mother-in-law, postmistress and district operator for forty years, in 1987.

Sue says the sound of the party lines was reassuring for old people, but only weeks after the changeover one woman confessed she had to stop and think how to use the old phone. "It's been an interesting transition," she says. "None of us would go back, but we all know what we're losing."

At Tryphena lives someone who really does know what is being lost. Seventy-six-year-old Les Todd helped install the island's first phone, erecting poles and carrying out maintenance work. In his shed hangs a piece of the copper telegraph wire laid from Tryphena to Port Charles on the tip of the Coromandel. In 1953 a radio transmitter was erected.

Tipi and Bob, local guesthouse owners, offer an unorthodox barbeque for the use of their guests.

Les, a lifelong bachelor, has not been off the island since the mid 1950s. The last time he visited Auckland the Harbour Bridge had not been built. There was, he says, a competition between himself and Les Blackwell's father Walter to see who could stay away from the rest of New Zealand the longest. Not that life has been uneventful as a result. Les remembers the brilliant glow in the sky to the south of the island the night the abandoned schooner *Cecilia Sudden* drifted ashore, its cargo of coal and kerosene ablaze. That was in 1921.

The following year, his father, riding over the bridle track to Rosalie Bay, was the first to sight the massive hulk of the steamer *Wiltshire* wedged firm on the rocks.

"There had been awful weather and the creeks were in flood. The rescue took days, and I remember the survivors being led down the track," says Les. "On the last day the captain came through on dad's horse."

The Todd family owned 400 prime acres in the Bay, and Les is reminded of its clean danthonia grass. The seedheads were harvested by hand with a sickle and the Blackwells sold enough in Auckland to eventually buy a launch.

Les's lifelong habit of accumulating oddities puts the efforts of his northern counterpart, Terry Quirk, in the shade. When Les moved to his present kauri timbered house in 1929 a helping friend was surprised to find, among the roomloads of wildly unrelated objects, two Centurion tank jacks. It is said that the stove in his house has been unapproachable for years due to the volume of stored material in the kitchen.

When Hillary climbed Everest in 1953, Les Todd, clad in mountaineering gear, scaled the White Cliffs by way of emulation. The gesture was not inappropriate. Hillary's father brought his son to the Barrier as a boy, says local Jack Roberts, to practise in the hills around Windy Gully.

Over summer, Great Barrier's natural beauty is a magnet for day trippers and short stay holiday makers. While tourism offers some benefit to the local economy many locals question whether the island's roads and amenities can withstand the onslaught.

When poet of the air Fred Ladd introduced Tourist Air Travel to the Barrier, Les became his unpaid helper, taking steps out to the amphibian aircraft whenever it landed, and helping unload it. To return the favour, Fred often tried, unsuccessfully, to lure Les to the city and acquaint him with such twentieth century advances as escalators and motorways. "He shouted me a flight around the island when he first started," says Les. "But that was as far as he got." He recalls that Fred, who instituted the lucrative "craybird" flights to Auckland for local fishermen, went to extra lengths to break the islanders' sense of isolation. "Whenever he had a spare paper he'd fly over someone's house and drop it for them," says Les.

The low drone of Fred's aircraft, and the quickly scribbled doggerel—along the lines of "turn up your dial and give us a smile"—before a paper was dropped endeared him to the islanders. He became an aerial version of the village priest, bringing urgently needed supplies and winging the sick and dying to safety. The islanders became his flock.

One of the most satisfying and most bizarre incidents of Fred's career came after he took pity on Olive Crawford, who lived alone on Fitzroy's Kaikoura island. Olive's phone was down and no one had seen her for a while, so Fred good-naturedly decided on a paper drop. When it fluttered to earth he saw her bolt from the back door. The truth of what happened only surfaced later. As Fred recollected in his autobiography: "She'd been bailed up in the house for two days by some of her half-wild cattle…. Every time she put a nose out to try to escape, the cattle, led by a couple of bulls, turned nasty.

When I flew over to drop the paper, the cattle all took off in fright for the bush. Olive didn't waste any time reading my paper, and I don't know that she even picked it up. She hopped straight over the fence and down to the launch to get to Fitzroy and ask Reg Cooper and his boys to come and deal with her cattle problem."

The incident says a lot about life on Barrier—about hardship and self-reliance, about isolation and the need to rely, at times perhaps unwillingly, on others.

The island has its problems—dustpumping tour buses, overtrawled waters, a crippled economy—but nevertheless it inspires a fierce loyalty among residents. It is a reservoir of alternative lifestyles, a leafy *tabula rasa* on which newcomers write their own futures, finding there an antidote to the straitjacket prescription of city living.

Senior constable Shane Godinet gazes at his beloved Kaitoke Beach as an aircraft drops lazily through the steel grey Claris morning. "A lot of people have come here from Waiheke," he says. "But there are no more islands. This is it. It's the last bastion."

*Sunbeam Creek Bridge at Okupu is one of a number of stone bridges on the island. Built in the 1930's it is almost total stone and has no reinforc*ing.