

Once Upon an Island

Jennifer Beck's account of her memorable visit to Great Barrier Island written in 2004
Years ago I began a list of places I want to visit before I'm too old to enjoy them.

Great Barrier Island or Aotea has always been on that list. Not just because I've heard of its rugged beauty, but also because I've been fascinated by stories.

The first was part of our family history, the story of how my father in the late 1930s 'helped build the airfield at Claris'. He told us of a summer spent living in a tent near the beach. It sounded exciting to me as a child. Later I've realised that as Dad worked for a contracting firm, most of his time was probably spent driving a truck or bulldozer, levelling out scrubland in the dust and heat.

The second story was told in a book I bought in a church opportunity shop. 'Great Barrier Calls', written by Grace Medland in 1969 gave an insight into what life had been like for a pioneering family on the island.

Grace wrote of her mother arriving in the 1860s to join her husband who was trying to establish a farm at what is now known as Medlands Beach. At Tryphena she was met by a settler with one leg who was 'mounted on his tame bull'. He fastened her luggage around the animal's neck, and following instructions to 'hang on to the tail' the young mother trudged with her three-month old baby over the bush-covered ranges and across the island to her new home.

When she finally arrived she was greeted by the husband she hadn't seen for months outside a whare built of rush and raupo. Grace was born there 1887, the sixth of ten children, three of whom died at a young age.

The whare was later replaced by a four-roomed cottage. This was an unexpected gift from a former neighbour to whom the family had shown hospitality despite their overcrowding and financial struggles.

The coast of Great Barrier is well known as the scene of numerous shipwrecks, but the loss of more than 121 lives from the ship Wairarapa in 1894 led to a demand for better communication with the mainland. As a result the pigeon post was established and is said to be the world's first airmail service.



Grace wrote of how the fledgling mail service was involved in an emergency a few years later. One morning when the island was lashed by a fierce storm her family found a bottle washed up on the beach. Inside they discovered a desperate note written by a ship's captain just the previous day, possibly as a record in case his ship was lost. He wrote that the Envy was caught in a heavy gale and had been damaged. He was struggling to keep her from being wrecked on the Barrier coast, and was trying to head north.

The Medlands relayed the message to Auckland by pigeongram and a ship was despatched to search for the Envy. The storm-damaged ship was eventually found off the Northland coast and escorted back to safety.

Then there was the story of the Rose-Noelle. I'd read how the crew, who had managed to survive against the odds at sea, struggled ashore when their upturned trimaran was wrecked on Great Barrier's rugged south east coast. After nearly four months of coping as an isolated group, making contact again with other people brought new challenges. I was intrigued by a crew member's description of his first experience of travelling in a vehicle after drifting at sea. He found the sensation of speed was frightening. Mind you, I realise now that the island's steep and winding metal roads wouldn't have given confidence.

You can get to Great Barrier by sea or air, but for me there was no choice. In memory of my father I had to set foot on the island at Claris Airfield. But as the plane flew over a magnificent sweep of coastline and we descended towards a lowland strip rimmed by a rugged mountain range, any nostalgic thoughts were overtaken by wonder at the breathtaking beauty of the place.

Our travel package was for three days, and each day brought unexpected experiences. We arrived on a Thursday, and an afternoon walk from our accommodation at Mulberry Grove took us to Tryphena Wharf.

Just as well we hadn't driven there in the hired car, parking space was as scarce as at The Viaduct Basin during the finals of the America's Cup. However the city comparison ends there, for some island vehicles seem to have evolved into a breed of their own, with their dust-coated bodies showing a tendency to develop multiple indentations, rusty appendages and

even doors of different colours. These mutations could be interpreted in Darwinian theory as a combination of survival of the fittest and freedom from Warrant of Fitness regulations in the past. However we later sighted an even rarer species resting in long grass along the roadside - twin Ford Escort front-ends joined together with two opposing steering wheels and seats facing in opposite directions.

We'd arrived at the wharf just as residents were unloading the boat which had brought supplies from Auckland. There was much shouting of names and claiming of sealed boxes, most of which appeared from their labels to hold bananas. Just as we were wondering about the local diet we recognised our host Pat McGrath from Manuka Lodge with a carton under his arm. He explained that the freight charge for goods from the city at the time was \$8 a box, (now \$10 - \$12) and recycled banana boxes just happened to be a standard-sized container.

There's still no electricity supply on the island, so solar panels, wind and other generators are needed to provide power. Residents also have to make their own provision for water, usually from roof tanks. With a range of excellent accommodation available most guests don't mind alternative plumbing systems and keeping showers shorter than usual.

There were several eating places close to Tryphena, and we dined at the Currach Irish Pub. This old timber-lined building is decorated with items of local history, and was formerly the home of descendants of George Blackwell, the helpful pioneer who escorted Grace Medland's mother to her new home. As diners enjoyed their Sirloin Steak Pohutukawa I tried not to look at some cattle grazing innocently in a paddock just outside the window.

Over the next two days we travelled around the island but found it's much bigger than it looks on a map. The pohutukawa trees were in full flower, their magnificence probably due to the island being free of pests such as possum. In one tree which had a full canopy of crimson we watched a kaka feeding. We tramped through lush native bush, bathed in hot springs and visited Port Fitzroy, different from Tryphena but also rich in history. I was reminded of an incident I'd read in a book by Cyril Moor (Early Settlement of Port Fitzroy Great Barrier Island), whose family had been pioneers in that area. A neighbour told the story of being woken one night by a very loud noise on a nearby pebbly beach. 'It sounded like 40 horses or more all galloping along. It turned out to be three whales that had got stranded in the pebbles, and the noise was their tails lashing...'

Moor also tells the story of the Le Roy homestead which was burned down in the early 1900s leaving a large family homeless. A message was sent by pigeongram to Auckland, and a load of timber arrived on the next steamer. 'Settlers arrived in their boats from all over the island, pitched tents and worked solidly, with the result that the new house was built in a week...' That island community spirit again.

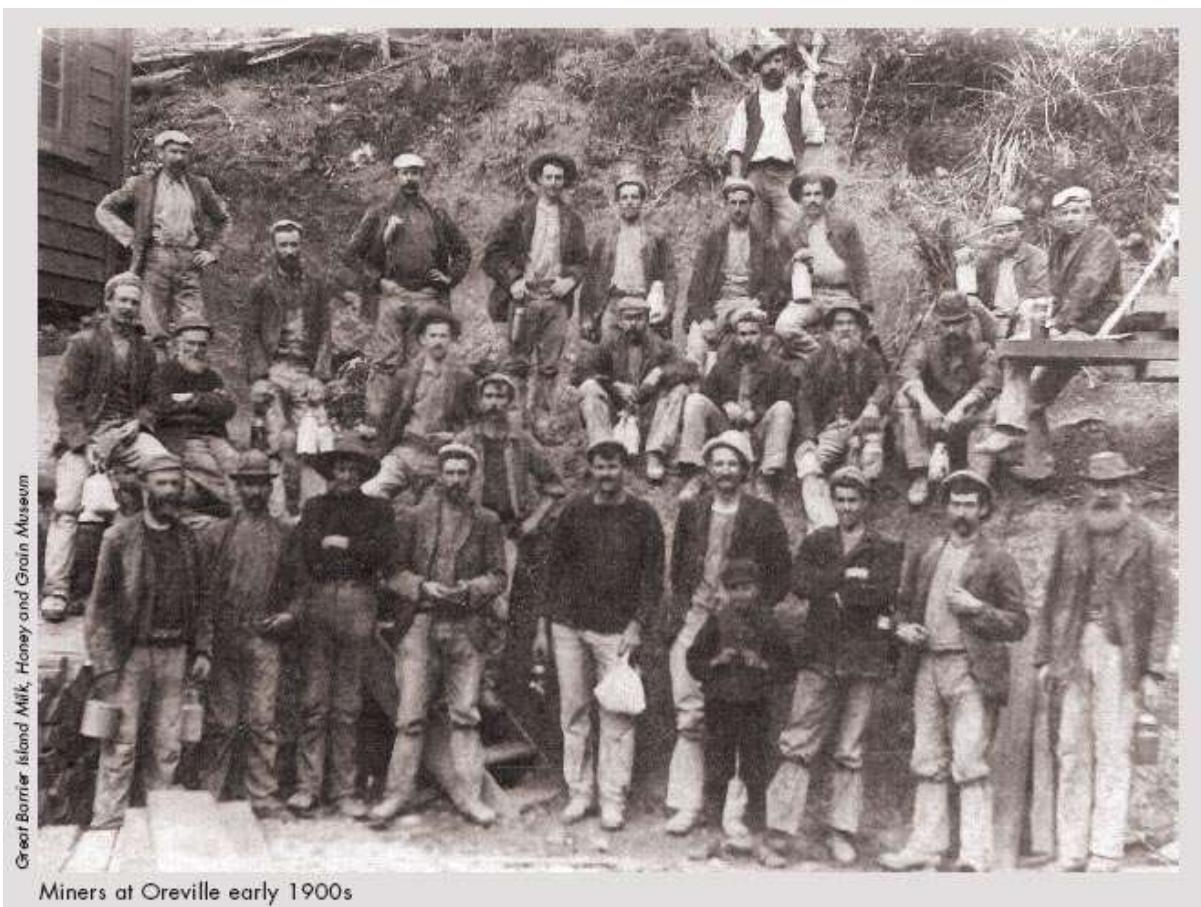
Just off the road north of Claris we took the short walk to Windy Canyon which provides spectacular views over the island. Clinging to the handrail in the buffeting wind our attention was divided between the view and watching a helicopter hovering above us. Suspended beneath it by a swinging cable was a large bag of gravel. As we held our breath the pilot skillfully dropped the load within a metre or so of a man wearing safety gear who signalled from a narrow saddle between the rugged cliffs.

While waiting for another load to arrive I talked with the man on the ground. Stan McGeady said the metal was to repair the track which also led to Hirakimata, the highest peak on the island. He's lived on the island all his life, did his schooling by Correspondence and was now working for the Department of Conservation. His mother has lived at Whangaparapara since she was a child. I asked about employment on the island. Stan said that his father worked for the Kauri Timber Company in the 1930s, then added, almost as an afterthought, that he'd also 'helped build the airfield at Claris'. We shook hands on that link with the past just as the helicopter, a reminder of the advance of aviation, returned with another load.

You need to spend more time than we had on the island to explore it properly. When Saturday came we still hadn't visited historic Maori sites on the island, the old kauri milling and mining areas, or local museums such as those at Okupu, Awana and Medlands.

However we were lucky in that our last day also happened to be the occasion of the annual Christmas fair and parade. It was a popular event with the island's residents and visitors. These included the then newly elected Mayor of Auckland. Dick Hubbard helped judge the decorated floats which had been circling the playing field to enthusiastic applause. He described the community atmosphere as reminding him of country towns in New Zealand thirty years ago.

There were stalls selling plants and other local produce, craft, home-baking, sausages and second-hand goods. I hadn't intended to buy anything, until I noticed on the clothing stall a



bundle of cream lace frothing defiantly over the top of a Lion Red carton. 'Made for a friend of mine,' the stall keeper said sadly, holding up a full-length lace wedding dress. 'Asked me to keep it at my place till her wedding day, but it didn't happen. I've had it hanging in the wardrobe for years now.' 'How much is it?' I asked. 'Make an offer,' she shrugged. 'Time to move on.'

The fabric had faded and the elastic round the frilled neckline had stretched well below a bridal bosom. But like Great Barrier, it was the story that sold it to me. The granddaughters will love it, and as for the island, I'll be back.

Eileen's Story

"I can't remember much before I started school. They had just built the new school at Catherine Bay, it was in about 1934. The land was given to the Education Board by Grandfather, on the understanding that if the school ever closed down, the land would come back to the shareholders. I walked to school – at the time I was living with my grandparents – who had fourteen children, seven boys and seven girls. Later, we got a boat and rowed part of the way. Mr Dobbs was our teacher, in fact the only teacher, and he took students from primary level right through to the second form. I left after Form II and did correspondence for a few years."

Eileen Ngawaka's family can trace the family history on the Island back to the mid 1800s. Her great grandfather Alfred Edlington of Lincolnshire, England arrived with brother William 'Matuaka' in 1859 and worked for the Great Barrier Mining Company. The earliest industry on the Barrier, the copper mines were located at Catherine Bay. "Grandfather came for the copper mines", says Eileen. "Otherwise it was mostly logging on the Island in those days."



Eileen Ngawaka at age 16 years

"Typhoid caused a lot of deaths in the 1930s. I can just remember these times. I spent five years on the mainland because of the fever. When Mum died – I was only ten – I was twelve when I came back to the Island with Dad. With a household of men it was up to me to do most of the cooking on the wood range. There was no running water; buckets of water were brought from the well – a dug hole with beautiful clean water. The washing was a big job in the large tubs and the sheets were boiled in the copper. Being the only female in the house I

found it a bit hard. Sometimes the copper was used to bath in but we usually jumped in the creek. Didn't seem to feel the cold in those days".

Eileen married a local boy who went on to work in forestry on Great Barrier for 29 years. Two of their boys have remained in forestry, of a different nature - working for Department of Conservation on the Island.

Eileen raised her family and worked at the Post Office at Port Fitzroy for a few years. "The mail came in once a week then, but when planes started arriving we got it daily".

Orders for supplies went out once a week and came back the next week. "We had to order in bulk. Flour and sugar came from the Mainland and items such as candles and kerosene lamps. Ponsonby for groceries – Franklins sent them over on the boat. We mostly lived off the land; plenty of fishing and cows enough for milking and meat. I tried to do the sewing otherwise we could order clothes from the Farmers Catalogue."

Expectant mothers went to Auckland two weeks before their confinement and then remained two weeks after. The doctor only visited Great Barrier once a month but the resident District Nurse was a superwoman from all accounts. Eileen comments, "When Mrs McLean was District Nurse at Port Fitzroy there were no roads to Katherine Bay, just a track over the Bay and over the hill. She never missed the fortnightly home visit ... and all by horseback. Once when the nurse was needed because of a case of poisoning (from eating green fruit) the nurse even came out at night on the horse."

To Eileen, who now has thirteen great grandchildren - "and one Christmas they all came home", she says - Great Barrier will *always* be called home.

Pat's Story



Pat Cooper was Postmistress and Telephonist at Okiwi from 1975 until the 1990s; the telephone switchboard became redundant in 1992 and the mail delivery service ceased its delivery from the Cooper homestead in 1997 (it is now distributed from Claris). Pat has since moved to Auckland, a far cry from her island upbringing. I was pleased to catch up with both Pat, and her brother Owen, to discuss their memories of Great Barrier.

Pat had followed in the footsteps of Grandfather Samuel Cooper. Samuel became Postmaster on 1 December 1900 when the Post Office first opened, based at in the Okiwi homestead. Later his daughters, Misses Xina and Annie Cooper (Pat's aunts), were appointed to the position. It was certainly not a case of a cushy desk job; job applicants in the 1930s had to supply their own horse and carry mail between Port Fitzroy and Okiwi, rising at 5.30am. Having driven the route by car during my visit to the island, this was no mean feat.

The role of the telephonist was key, connecting the isolated community with each other and the outside world. "There was a bank of bells in the Okiwi house so that no calls coming through the switchboard were missed", Owen remembers. "They would ring at all hours of the day ... and night."

Pat moved across to the Barrier from Auckland's Waitakere Ranges in June 1926 when her father Ivar Eskine Cooper took a job as a hauler driver moving the large kauri logs that were very much in demand by an eager Auckland market. "During the war years, because of strict security, we were not allowed to leave the island without a permit." Owen was born at Great Barrier but left for his secondary schooling on the mainland in his teenage years.

The family, cared for by the capable hands of Mrs Freda Adelaide Cooper, lived in the Okiwi house built of timber from the old Whangaparapara Mill in 1926. It stood on ex-Copper Mine land. "This land had been given in lieu of pay to members of the Paddison family when the company went belly up, later the Cooper family purchased this property", Owen adds. The first Cooper to reside on the island was Mrs Elizabeth (Samuel's mother) who settled at Warren's, Port Fitzroy (now known as the DOC headquarters) in 1884.

"We had no electricity when I was growing up. No electric lighting, and the first time I ever cooked on an electric stove was after my recent move to Auckland", says Pat. "The refrigerator was the culvert with the cold creek running through! Once a week the boat came with supplies, although our family usually only placed a monthly order.

Everyone needed to be self-sufficient – from vegetable growing to butter churning." All hard work and no play? Not according to Pat and Owen - they both agree, it would take a lot to beat a Great Barrier childhood.



Les & Beverley's Story



Beverley Blackwell's great grandfather Benjamin Sanderson was born in Cumbria, England. He sailed to New Zealand as a twelve year old, with sister Sarah, and parents William and Ann Sanderson, on the sailing ship *Tybernia*. A sibling was born during the 1863 voyage and named Ann *Tybernia*. Brother William was born at Okupu in 1866.

At that time the New Zealand government was calling for people to come to the colonies. A wave of European settlers were attracted to Great Barrier Island with the government's subdivision of the



land. Some acquired farming blocks, farming sheep and cattle, many cut firewood for the Auckland market and beekeeping provided an additional income and a product with which to barter. Gum digging was another sideline, and fishing.



The rifle club in the mid 1950's

Others were lured away to find their fortune on the goldfields at Thames. The Sanderson family settled on the Island to farm and, in 1892, they discovered silver at Okupu. The volcanic soil showed signs of quartz and the search paid off. A silver bracelet, still treasured by the family, was made from the first yield. Mining brought the whole area alive in the 1890s.

Beverley's ancestors had a head start on the Blackwells. Not by much though. Les Blackwell's great grandparents arrived on the sailing ship *Victory* in 1865 from Ireland. It was a 127 day voyage, Beverley confirms from her carefully recorded family histories. George and Elizabeth Blackwell made the decision to settle at Great Barrier Island in 1867. A very good decision as

far as great grandson Les is concerned, there's unquestionably no place like home. The Blackwells pioneered beekeeping on the Island - Les proudly tells that his great grandfather provided Pohutukawa honey for the table of King George V.

When they were young, both Les and Beverley worked on their respective family dairy and sheep farm. At one stage Les assisted his mother for three seasons to hand milk 50 cows morning and night while a new cow shed, complete with milking machine, was being built.

"We enjoyed fish meals from the sea, and meat, milk and cream came from the farm, with wild pork hunted from the bush." Les' mother kept about 100 fowls, selling the eggs to the City markets.

"We always had our chores to do outside – milking hours, wood to collect, calves, pigs, hens and dogs to feed. It's a wonder we had time to go to school. There were fun times, and life was exciting. Our parents were always very good to us, giving encouragement and support."



Beverley and Les were married in 1957. The Bishop gave permission for them to wed on Great Barrier Island, and the Rev. Castles officiated. They have spent 50 years plus of married life in a house designed and built by Les.

"My uncle, who was 70 at the time, told me what to do and each day I followed his instruction. We started on the 11th October 1956 and finished in May of the following year. We bought an

English Rayburn stove costing £105 - a lot of money in 1956". Les made all the joinery and cupboards, and modern conveniences were installed. Les has been involved in working on the Barrier roads and general carrying for 49 years.

"We moved everything to and from the scows and barges. If the weather was bad, the barge would be delayed. Occasionally farmers would spend all night rounding up stock, only to find that the barge couldn't make the crossing. The cattle would all have to go back to where they came from. Sorting them out was quite a problem."

Les carried on the Blackwell tradition of beekeeping to supplement the carrying business, and one season exported to Auckland some 15 tonne of honey!

"Our four children had a wonderful childhood growing up on Great Barrier Island," Beverley recalls. "We would read to the children by lamplight each evening before they went to bed. And no distraction of television in those early days. The children attended Mulberry Grove

School at Tryphena and received a wonderful start to their education. They went on to attend secondary schooling in Auckland. Reduced fares from the Auckland Aero Club enabled them to fly home about every six weeks. It was very hard for them leaving their lovely Island home, but they coped amazingly well, and we were very proud of them.”

We asked Les about his first car. “I’ve had four so far. In 1957, I sold my motorbike and bought a 1947 Chev Fleetmaster. My latest car is a 1981 Oldsmobile which I have had for the last 20 years.” Most of the roads in the central area of the Island were linked in 1938 when the airfield was completed. In the early days, mode of travel was by boat, horseback and on foot.

“Fuel is expensive here now – for our vehicles and power generators. The area didn’t really open up until 1938 when an engineer came across to link the roads. In 1995 a wind turbine was installed, giving 24 hour power to the house. A vast improvement on running a generator in the evenings, and a far cry from the days of candles and lamps. It was a great day in 1997 when we were given a street number for our house!” 49

Following in their ancestors’ footsteps, the Blackwell’s are passionate gardeners - “the garden rewards”. They grow five different types of Maori potatoes, along with more vegetable varieties than I have even seen in one place. And fruit - citrus, tangelos, oranges, mandarins, grapefruit, peaches, avocados, macadamia nuts, kiwi fruit - although Les did admit to less success with the banana. Keeping up with the bottling must be a challenge for Beverley.

The garden also rewarded us. Afternoon tea during the course of our interview consisted of a sample of the produce: delicious homemade jam atop homemade scones.

“Nowadays, with our grandchildren having birthdays, 21sts and weddings, we go to Auckland a number of times during the year”, remarks Beverley. “Next time you come we’ll show you around the flower garden”. I’ll make sure we put aside a full day!



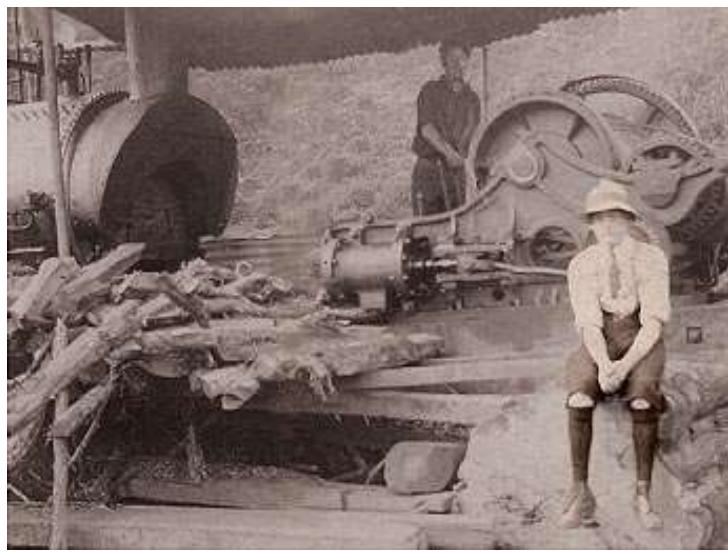
Walter (Beverley's grandfather - on the right) and Beverley's father, Hector Sanderson (left) transport cream to the port over the wagon track.

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Mad Hatter's Tea Party at Okiwi School, 1950. From left; Laurie Mabey, Lesley Mabey, Murray Mabey, David Cooper, Owen Cooper. (First pupils of the Okiwi School, opened 1949)



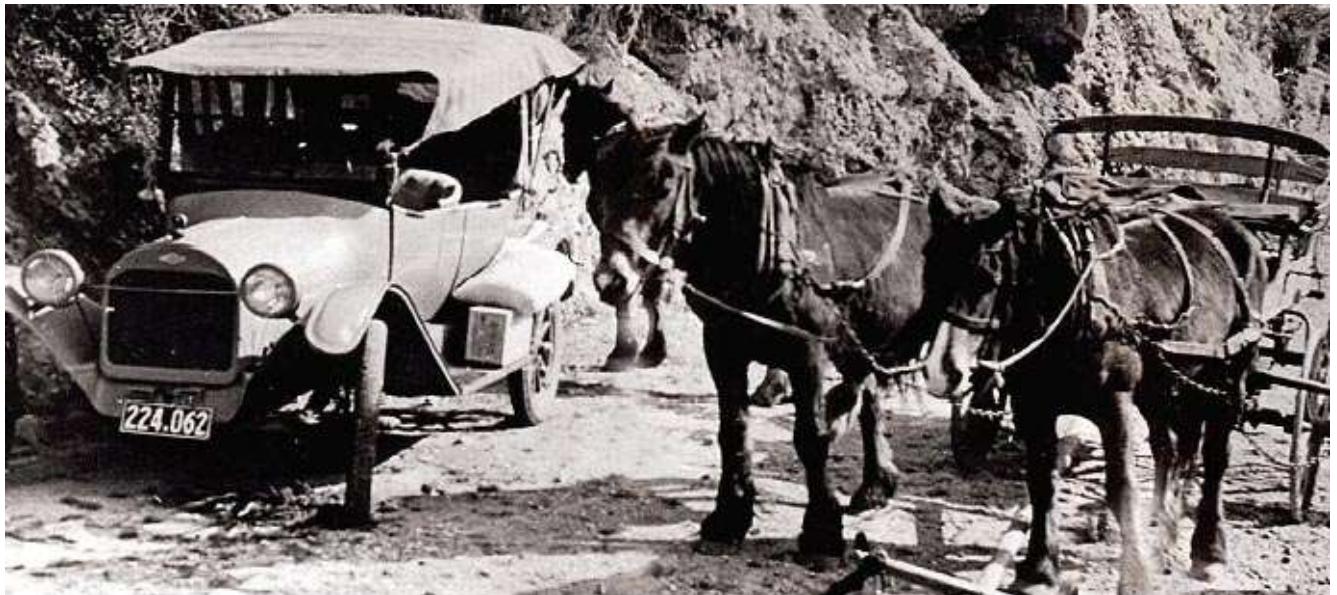
Hauler used on the tramline in the timber working days - logs were hauled to Whangaparapara. Ivar Cooper at the controls.



First plane to land at Okiwi in the 1930's



Going to school from Okiwi to Port FitzRoy. From left: Garth Cooper, Pat Cooper, Vera Laing, 1930's



The old and the new - Great Barrier Island Transport at Port FitzRoy Wharf. Rollie Sanderson's 1918 Chev with groceries on the running board and Cooper's wagon with horses.