

OKARITO AND DISTRICT

THE BUSY DAYS OF SOUTH WESTLAND RECALLED.

A GREAT FUTURE UNDOUBTEDLY IN STORE.

(Contributed by Jas. Donovan, Esq.)

As the time for the Hokitika jubilee (70 years) is fast approaching, it is interesting to review some of the principal events that occurred in that period, 1865, when the great gold rush took place in the northern portion of Westland. In the first few months of that year parties of miners made their way from Hokitika along the sea coast through South Westland searching the rivers, creeks and terraces for gold.

These miners came mostly from the Australian and Otago goldfields, and were accustomed to the rough coarse gold found inland. Consequently they at first walked over the golden sands on the sea beaches. This gold, being fine did not appeal to them. For instance, McDonald's Creek, about nine miles inland from Okarito, was worked (despite all difficulties in reaching that location) before gold was discovered on the Five Mile beach, thus called on account of its distance from Okarito.

With regard to the last named locality I cannot do better than quote the following from the "Golden Coast," a book written by R. C. Reid, well-known in the early days. He says: "We started from Hokitika in the Steamer "Bruce" on either her first or second trip to that reported "Eldorado." Mr R. C. Reid took with him £1000 in notes to buy gold for the Union Bank, Hokitika, and, not telling anyone of his mission made straight to the heart of the diggings, the Five Mile, where he found no difficulty in meeting with a couple of customers for his Bank notes in exchange for gold dust at £3 10s to £3 10s 6d per ounce, making a profit of 2s 6d per ounce.

Mr Reid decided on making a second trip with a double allowance of cash. As showing how fortunate some of the miners were on the Five Mile beach he accosted four of a party asking if they had any gold to sell. After consulting together, one of the party inquired: "How much money have you, mate?" Thinking he had enough to buy any single parcel of gold on the field, replied: "As much as you require." In this he was mistaken for on reaching the tent they presented a couple of billies both nearly brim full of the finest gold dust, and said that was the result of six weeks' work. When weighed Mr Reid found he was short of £100 or more to purchase the lot.

He says that any one who had the good fortune to get a claim on the Five Mile beach at Okarito at the end of 1865 or early in 1866 was safe for a "rich patch." The returns met with in some instances were positively fabulous, and it is not to be wondered that some diggers who toiled previously for years for mere tucker were so startled at their luck on this beach that they gave way at times to the wildest extravagance and riot.

The steamer Bruce was bringing up to Hokitika 3000 to 4000 ozs. every trip. Mr Reid says: "I knew of one party who sent 7000 ozs on their own account. That heavier gold must be distributed inland from those golden benches, with no niggard hand, and will be discovered some day when better facilities are offered for prospecting, was Mr Reid's opinion and this stands good to-day.

It is not known who first discovered and worked the Five Mile beach, but to verify my first statement, a well-known South Westland miner, now dead, informed me that his party went south to Paringa and when going and returning they camped on the Five Mile beach, and passed on, not knowing of the rich gold and they walked over.

The Okarito River at that period had its course just in front of the present street where the mooring piers are still to be seen. The river hugged the Terrace under the lee of the Three Mile Bluff and entered the sea at the present flag-staff from a large lagoon five miles in length and about three miles wide, and having a good entrance.

The rush of the tide inward filled this large lagoon and the outward scour kept a good and deep channel. Vessels came to Okarito from all parts of New Zealand and from Australia direct. With all this shipping in the early days, only one vessel, the "Rambler," was lost. Even as late as February 10, 1872, Captain Thompson, harbour master, reports the arrival of a fine topsail schooner the "Lizzie Guy" eight days from Melbourne direct with a cargo of 130 tons consigned to Mace and Canavan the well-known Okarito storekeepers. The vessel sailed in over the bar in good style and discharged her cargo.

The Town of Okarito streets and sections were laid out in a thorough system consequently the "Strand" the front street, is as straight as an arrow. The town at its height had a population of 5000 but in about a year the population fell rapidly. The easily got gold on the beaches was soon worked, and rushes to other parts of Westland attracted the miners. But Okarito was the port and distributing centre of a district extending from Gillespies in the south to Saltwater Beach and in the north, of which the intervening localities, Moonlight, Sandly, Waikunuku, Omerau, Waiho, McDonnell's Creek, The Forks, North Beach, and Wataroa were mining centres.

The town had its harbour master's residence, signal station, Resident Magistrate's dwelling, court house, police station, Land and Survey Office, Customs and bonded stores, about 26 hotels, theatre (Sheehan's), a newspaper, two banks and several

Houses were built for the most part large buildings for merchandise. of Oregon and Baltic pine with iron roofs, Okarito had a road board for a short period during the seventies, but always had representation in the Westland County Council in the early days.

The following were some of the resident members:—Messrs R. Canavan, Jas Wilson, R. Donovan, and Jas. McGoldrick. It was on the North Beach, Okarito, that Mr McKay completed the purchase of lands in Westland from the Maoris in that locality for £300, in May 1860.

Old identities will remember some of the following prominent citizens:—Mace and Canavan, McFetrick and Co., general merchants; Friend and Co., butchers; Mr Price, resident magistrate and warden; F. Bird, Izzard, Collector of Customs; Captains Hearn and Thompson, harbour-masters, S. Barry, Jas S. Benyon, Joseph Burrough, Jas. Wilson, Edward Ryan, P. Adamson and the late Wm. Patrick.

In 1880, Okarito was only a skeleton of its former self, but the discovery of gold at Mapourika gave a new lease of life to the town. Some miners arrived, and that locality held a fair population for many years.

The Okarito river changed its course, the entrance being near the flag staff, and under the protection of the bluff became sanded up. The mouth shifting north more out on the open beach was repeatedly blocked, and steamers had great difficulty in entering, being often held or imprisoned within for weeks. Supplies used to run short, and the district suffered a severe handicap.

From the early nineties until 1910 great efforts were made to work up a timber and flax trade. In 1906 three flaxmills were operating, but owing to the bad state of the entrance steamers were held up and eventually all enterprise in this direction had to be given up.

Strong representations were made to the Government, asking for harbour improvement but this failed, although the late Mr R. J. Seddon fully realised the resources of the district, and the importance of improving the harbour. He had a survey under way when he died and had he lived a few years longer, the harbour would probably have been an accomplished fact. What a great difference this would have made to central Westland. However, by 1926 Okarito had almost become like Goldsmith's deserted village.

It was then that Mr R. T. Stewart pegged out the Five Mile Beach and began boring operations after thoroughly prospecting, and becoming satisfied with results, he decided to put

on a dredge, but was faced with great difficulties. Shipping to Okarito had ceased, and the roads and tracks were in a bad state. Notwithstanding all this, Mr R. T. Stewart was determined and despite all obstacles and to his credit he did succeed not only in erecting the dredge, but in devising a machine that did the work and saved the fine gold. This dredge is successful and will continue to win good returns for many years.

Okarito is again reviving. The price of gold has brought many into the district, and the search and recovery of the precious metal is giving employment to a number of men. With better facilities for importing mining machinery, I venture to say that the Five Mile dredge is just the fore runner of other successful dredges in this district.

During the last twenty years the Government has improved the main south road from Ross to Weheka, erected bridges over nearly all creeks and rivers, and as a result of better access, and quick transport, settlement is advancing rapidly. That very fine district of Wataroa almost doubled its population last year.

This improved road access should be pushed on south to Bruce Bay without unnecessary delay. If this were done, with the big timber milling industry now being started in that district, people would be astonished to see how rapidly that portion of south Westland would advance. Travellers along the main south road have but little idea of the valuable country between that road and the sea coast, but the country mentioned can only be developed by a good safe harbour.

Persons from other parts of the Dominion have been spying out the land, and marine engineers, after thorough investigation, are satisfied a harbour as above mentioned can be made at Okarito. Consequently a company is now at work on its construction.

There are great forests of timber in the immediate vicinity of Okarito. The Forestry Department after a survey, estimates 1500,000,000 feet of milling timber on their reserves adjacent to the port of Okarito, while there are some 500,000,000 feet on private property. There are some great stands of white pine mostly on very good land.

When the port is opened for shipping again, the district, with its wealth of timber, flax, gold and other minerals, and its lovely unspoiled scenery will have a great future. Okarito will, not to-day or to-morrow, but in time, in my opinion, once again be the principal port and distributing town for Central Westland.

GLACIER REGIONS

WONDERLAND OF SNOW AND ICE.

"Hoary summits clear and sharp in the distance; drifting expanses swooping down in white curves; milk-white folds overlapping chalk-like crevasses; the quivering ice wash of the hidden hollow, a huge white pillow heaving high; next turquoise clefts, powdered steps; headlong descents of cobalt; zig-zags of emerald and white, outlined by indigo ceptas; awesome crevasses; abysmal fissures; poised transparencies; translucent stairways; and blue chasms full of reflecting light." Thus a writer in praise of the southern Glaciers.

Approximately 100 miles south of Hokitika, there are two rivers of ice, the Franz Josef and Fox Glaciers. These are recognised as the fastest moving and lowest lying inland glaciers in the world. Surrounded by tropical forest, hot springs, rivers and lakes of remarkable beauty, the attraction of these Glaciers from a scenic point of view can hardly be surpassed anywhere on the globe.

Both these glaciers are easy of access. In fact, anyone who can ride or hike can get on to the ice. A very fine car-road has recently been finished, leading to within 300 yards of the terminal face of Fox Glacier.

At the heads of these two glaciers there is an area of approximately 12,000 acres of snow-field, possibly the finest summer and winter skiing ground in the temperate zone.

To illustrate the possibilities for skiing in this district, mention may be made of the 30 miles ski-run, undertaken last August. Starting from Chancellor Hut (4,500) on the Fox Glacier, the party proceeded to Pioneer Hut 8000ft high. The next day they ascended Governor Col (9200ft), the highest used pass in New Zealand, on the main divide north of Mt. Gray, at the head of the Fox Glacier, thence ascending by way of Haast Glacier to Tasman Glacier, making the de la Beche Hut the same evening. The return trip was made via Rudolf Glacier to Graham Saddle (8,765ft) thence cutting across the Franz Josef Glacier near to Newton Pass (8,000ft) on the Triad Ridge the line of demarcation between the basins of the Franz and Fox Glaciers.

The Pioneer Hut was reached that evening and the thirty miles trip was completed by the run down to Chancellor Hut the following day.

In these vast snow basins at the heads of these two glaciers almost unbroken by crevasses, even in summer there is unlimited opportunities for beginners and experts to indulge in the sport of skiing.

There are gentle, undulating slopes for beginners, and for the more experienced skiers there are stiffer slopes where ski jumps could be built, thus completing the attraction of this district as a winter playground.

Although the highest mountain is 12,349ft, a height which is considerably exceeded in some other countries, it must be remembered that our summer snow line is about 6,000ft, which is much lower than the line of perpetual snow in other countries.

Not far from the site of the bivouac used by the earlier pioneers in climbing on the West Coast, Dr Teichmann and the Rev. Canon Newton, there is now established a comfortable climbing hut on the Pioneer ridge at an altitude of 8,000ft. This marks it the highest hut in New Zealand.

Out of seventeen peaks in New Zealand exceeding 10,000ft in height, no fewer than seven can be climbed from this hut, as well as dozens of lower peaks, many over 9000ft.

Still further south of the glaciers mentioned, there lies a great expanse of mountainous country. Most of the rivers and glaciers and valleys in the south were investigated by the West Coast explorers, Charles Douglas and Arthur P. Harper over 45 ago. With

the exception of the well-known routes up the glorious Copland Valley, with its hot springs, to the Hermitage and over the Haast Pass to Lake Wanaka, this country is practically unknown. However, it affords great possibilities to enterprising trappers and climbers.

Both the Fox and Tasman Glaciers are becoming increasingly popular, as is shown by the increase in the number of overseas tourists each year. Some prominent visitors have given it as their opinion that neither loses anything in comparison with Switzerland and Italy, or with the American glacier attractions, while the gorgeous wealth of nature's loveliness to be seen on all sides is incomparable with anything they have seen.