

Early Years in Horotane Valley

By Ted Shields

My father, Cecil Shields, settled in Horotane Valley in 1922 after serving as a machine gunner in Egypt during WW1. His brother, Henry, had settled on the adjoining property a year earlier and he too had returned from WW1 after serving in the Australian Army as a cavalry man.



Ces Shields. Machine Gunner Training

Shortly before the war, the valley was subdivided and planted out with fruit trees. Following the war, the blocks of land were settled by returned soldiers, many of whom would spend their entire working lives in the valley. It was some years after the Second World War that some of the properties were subdivided and more people came into the valley.

I was born early 1935 and have spent my life on the family property which was originally six acres including a two-acre block on the hillside where our draft horse "Jock" grazed.

There were very few children in the valley when I was a child. Those of my decade were Alison and Lola Stow, Gordon, Ruth and Susan Ogilvie, Trevor, June and Douglas Roberts, June and Molly Lane, Neill and Bevan Bickerton, Peter, Frank and Jean Curtis, Cousins Tony and Mary Shields, Lester, Jack and Suzanne Vincent and my sister Brenda. Most

of us attended Heathcote Valley School initially but with the wartime shortage of teachers a lot of us moved to other primary schools. We were taught by returned servicemen who were strict disciplinarians.

My uncle Henry lived in a tent for about twelve months while his house was being built, whereas my father lived in a stable which had been built by a previous owner. The stable was gradually added to and when my sister Brenda arrived it was added to again.



The Shields' Farms, circa 1922 [note tent beside shed]

At the bottom of the valley, some of the properties had a mix of outdoor tomatoes and orchards whereas at the top it was mainly orchards due to it being relatively frost free. Our property had 500 fruit trees and my father grew 24,000 outdoor tomatoes and 2000 glasshouse tomatoes with most of the produce being marketed in either Christchurch or Dunedin.

The work involved on these properties was labour intensive prior to mechanisation and many boys and girls of my generation would ride their bikes from afar to spend the school holidays harvesting the fruit or making the wooden fruit boxes etc.

In later years, a contractor would be employed to do any cultivation on our property which was done

by horse and plough. If I knew "Jack the Ploughman" was working on our property I would race home from school and spend hours walking in the furrow behind him smelling the freshly turned turf. He would talk to his horse as well as me although I was too young to engage in much of the conversation. I can still imagine the sound of the harness and chains rattling as the horse changed direction.

Some servicemen who returned from the Second World War settled here with their families, many of whom had different backgrounds as opposed to those earlier who were "people of the land". Those who settled after WW2 were Doug Mann, Bill Winchester Snr, Tony Burnett, Bill Reeves, Don Gunn. Ron Bickerton, Reg Arnold, Todd Curtis, Russell Closey and Lionel Vincent. They in turn were followed later by Peter McGrail Snr, Peter Jarvis, Neville Holt, Rex Mundy, Peter Dawson, Len Whittaker, John Wisker, Russell McKenzie, Keith Bate, David Caddie and Ray Summers. Some of those people have family still living in the valley.

Typical of those who lived off the land, the wives were also involved with the physical work and it is likely a lot of the growers would not have managed without their wives' input.



My Wife Dawn "pulling her weight"

For my generation, the valley was Utopia with the Port Hills at our backdoor for tramping, rabbits and hares to shoot and mushrooms on the flats to gather.

Our life on the land was simple. We had a cow, pigs and chooks and were virtually self-sufficient and with a comprehensive vegetable garden.

When I finished secondary school I took on an apprenticeship as a carpenter. It was during this time that I did my Compulsory Military Training {CMT} in the Signals Corps. The day I finished my five-year apprenticeship I started my own building business building houses, shops and factories. We did quite a bit of "country work" also which involved farm buildings etc.

I later retired from building and grew tomatoes for nine years until the Australian imported tomatoes killed the industry. The importation of tomatoes from Australia changed the land use here entirely, so much so, that the majority of the properties are now "lifestyle" blocks and non-productive. Those who are still producing have embraced modern technology.

My spare time was taken up with deer stalking and yachting. My father was a lifetime yachtsman so I was bred into it. It was my father who enticed my cousin Tony into yachting where he made a name for himself, both locally and nationally.

In later years I played bowls as also did my wife Dawn and then substituted hunting with tramping with The Over Forties Tramping Club where I served as secretary for a three year term. Membership was about 550 members at the time which was the largest tramping club in NZ. Membership was an even balance of men and women.

I am quite attached to Horotane Valley where our family also shared the joys of living here.