**Down The Beach Talk**

Ōtaki Library Thursday 5 July

**Heather Watson** – Spent a lot of time at Ōtaki Beach growing up – “it was our playground”. She remembers going there with her family to collect “wood, fish, seafood , ducks…”. Birch was the “prized wood” to collect as it burnt long and slow.

The family also hauled for flounder. She recalled a lot of bartering with other families. She also ate so much fish that when she left home she didn’t eat for at least three years.

During the summer the Watson family would light a fire on the beach, gut their catch and cook everything on a skillet, it was “truly the best”. Pipis on bread were a favourite. Heather also remembers collecting toheroa – before they were banned.

Heather’s father’s friend, Lumpty Higgot, also took the Watson’s to get eels at Waiorongomai. The eels were so plentiful then that they were hauled with a pitchfork on to Lumpty’s truck. When taken home the eels were hung on the clothesline before being put in her father’s smokehouse.

Heather talked about a date with a young man who “dubbed” her on his bike from Ōtaki Township to the beach and they swam all day long. Another memory of the beach involved shipwrecks which were visible just off the shore - the *Cornishman* (1981) sunk off Ōtaki Beach and the *Phyllis* off Peka Peka Beach (1954).

Heather as a kid she was envious of the children at the Feltham Home because they had their own tennis court.

**Jean** **Albert**– Grew up in Wellington but would stay with her great-grandmother in Levin. They would come to Ōtaki Beach for whanau days where they camped on the Waitohu Stream. One time Jean got badly burnt while walking from the Waitohu Stream to the Ōtaki River mouth and back. She was burnt to the “7th layer” and had to be treated at Wellington Hospital. The burns took months to heal.

Jean thinks Otaki Beach is much shallower now than it was – as you can now walk out quite far to collect shellfish. She recalls there were a few drowning’s at the beach during the late 40’s to early 50’s. The Otaki tides were very strong - and her nan was always very protective of the kids when they went in the water. There were also places further south where they were not permitted to go – Jean believes this was due to battles that had taken place many years before.

**Louise Carkeek** – Louise first arrived in Otaki as a nurse during World War II.Fear of Japanese invasion meant that pediatric and geriatric patients from Wellington Hospital were moved to the Otaki Health Camp. When Louise first came to Otaki Beach there were pot-holed shingle roads and “barely any houses”. The road to the Health Camp was surrounded by flax bushes. There was no street lighting.

At the Health Camp the two rotunda buildings were temporarily used as hospital wards to house patients - men and women separately. Louise remembers that the nurses weren’t supplied with torches and would have to move between wards in the dark. The nurses themselves were housed at Byron Browns – and often received dance invitations from the US Marines stationed at Paekakariki.

Louise didn’t attend the dances with Marines as she “wasn’t much of a dancer” and was engaged to a local man, Bunny Carkeek. She remembers though that there were two guard houses at the eastern end of Tasman Road – their job being to monitor the comings and goings of the visiting Americans. She recalls that “they were everywhere”.

Though Louise and Bunny later bought up their family in the Hutt – they returned often to Otaki and camped at the council-owned Otaki Beach Camping Ground on Moana Street. A favourite pastime was to go and collect toheroa. There was a bit of skill involved in spotting and digging the shellfish.

Louise and her husband moved back to Otaki permanently in about 1975 – and she became very active in community affairs. Louise started popular exercise classes for the disabled at the Ōtaki Surf Club. She also helped to have the Gertrude Atmore Memorial Clock installed.

**Don Watson–**

As a young boy, Don used to cut through **Ryders farm** from Kirk Street and walk along the riverbank to the river mouth to fish. He remembers running around by the flood gates with tracks through the Lupin.

Don would also whitebait and camp over on the Katihiku side of the river in a tent. He would usually make an 8 o’clock start “to get the best possie” and would be rugged up in his oilskin hat and jacket. On occasion, his parent even brought him out Sunday roast.

Vying for a good position on the river was a big part of the whitebaiting. Sometimes Don went without breakfast to be first on the river. Mrs Hawea once told young Don to go and have breakfast at her camp – as she knew he hadn’t eaten – and she would watch his net.

There were rules on the river. Don’s father once told Mrs Edwards that he’d throw her in the river after she set up her net right in front of young Don’s.

The Rikihana whanau usually based themselves down at the floodgates– and Don sometimes joined them. On race days though, he’d have the gates all to himself as locals headed off to the track for the day.

Don also went fishing with his father and their friend Lumpty Higgot. A favourite pastime was floundering. They would get to the river mouth via Kapiti Lane, then set up drag nets.

They would also go out to the island on Lumpty’s boat the *Sudden Jerk* – which they launched from the River Mouth travelling out through the bar to Kapiti. At Kapiti they would fish by the caretaker’s house or the waterfalls. Don remembers “butterfish swimming like angels”.

Looking back, Don said he had seen many changes over the years – including the course of the river. The beach and river were no longer as plentiful as they were when he was growing up.

While he hadn’t been out to the river for years, Don did visit recently and was happy to see people still there with nets, fishing for kahawai and herrings.

**Noel McBeth** – Has lived at Ōtaki Beach for just over 40 years. During this time he worked as both a truck and bus driver. His family owned butcher shops in Otaki, in both the town and railway areas.

According to Noel his grandfather sponsored money to help set up the new Ōtaki Surf Club building in the 1950s – and was the president for some time.

In the 1930’s money was raised for the building of the Beach Pavilion through Queen Carnivals (where there was Queen of the Railway, Queen of the Beach, Queen of the Town etc…). Noel’s mother had been named Queen of the Railway.

Some of the Ōtaki Beach businesses Noel recalled included:

* Sunbeam Motor Service on of Toi Street (later Ballingers, then Thomson’s Passenger Services under Frank Williamson).
* The original Beach Store which was lost in a fire, then rebuilt on the same site (Tasman Road).
* A wine shop on the corner of Toi and Moana streets – this later moved to Otaki Main Street where it was named Nosretap (its owner’s name in reverse).
* Capital Motor Camp – which was Council owned and popular with holidaymakers. Many locals would also get their basic groceries - like bread & milk - at the small camp shop.
* The Beach Butchery was on Moana Street - Mrs Huxtable was the only woman butcher that Noel knew of in New Zealand.

Noel shared a story of a small airplane landing on the sand at Otaki beach. His father paid £10 so that his mother could take a ride. The small plane took off from Ōtaki Beach did a loop of Ōtaki and then landed back on the beach.

**Some other information provided**

* 1938 Tasman and Rangiuru Road linked to Marine Parade.
* 1953 The Ōtaki Surf Live Saving Club reformed.
* There was a campsite
* Everyone who attended the talk spoke about Feltham Children’s home on Marine Parade. This complex is now the Ocean View Rest Home (previously Cartref) – and we were lucky to have a group of residents in attendance.
* There was a popular camping area situated behind the Otaki Health camp by the “pine forest” on Rangiuru Rd where people could pitch their tents.

Heather Watson concluded: “We are so lucky to have such a wonderful and special place in our own backyard”

*Note*

*Please note this was a memory-sharing session – where people willingly shared their personal reminiscences and memories of old Ōtaki. However we have learnt that not everyone remembers the same thing the same way. Please do not think that the information provided here is definitive.*