

Scandinavian Settlement

Dorothy Ropiha

The Scandinavians who settled in the Seventy Mile Bush turned forested country into productive farmland.

The Special Settlement of Scandinavians in New Zealand began in the 1860s when the Government, wishing to open up the densely forested areas in the North Island, looked to planned immigration from northern hemisphere countries. In 1870 the Immigration and Public Works Act enabled the Government to raise a loan of ten million pounds on the English market to implement Vogel's plan of immigration and public works.

The establishment of a small Scandinavian community in the Manawatu in 1866 had been successful but the main settlements of the 1870s were to be in the Seventy Mile Bush. The proposal was for a series of villages, each of fifty to seventy families. A memorandum from William Gisborne, Public Works Office, Wellington, written in 1871, reads: "It is intended that the Scandinavian immigrants be located in three small settlements along the line of road in the Seventy Mile Bush — two Norwegian and one Swedish." Julius Vogel stipulated that these migrants "must be sober, industrious and in good health, of good moral character, and of sound mind" and that they were being recruited expressly "for the formation of roads, bridges and railways".

In the Foreword of *A Goodly Heritage*, published for the centennial of Eketahuna and District, G.C. Peterson comments: "The decision of the Government in planning Special Scandinavian Settlements was that only forested land was made available. For some reason it was considered that Scandinavians were particularly inured to hardship and would be quite at home in the wilderness. Sections sold were approximately fifty acres, sufficiently uneconomic to pin the immigrants down to improving the land and felling the bush, while earning subsistence income from road and rail construction work. All of which accentuated the isolation these settlers

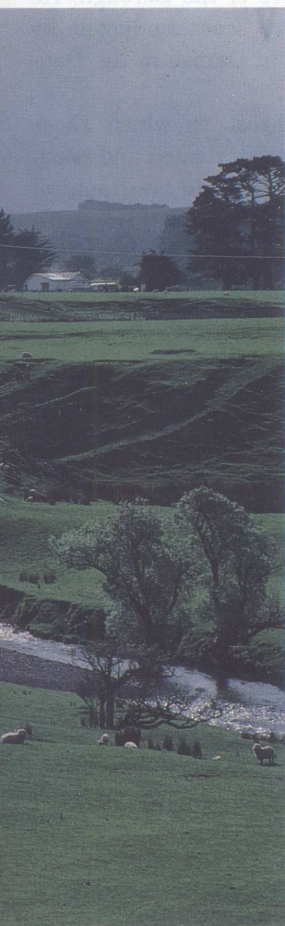


felt, and rendered their hardships incredibly severe. Frugal and hardy they had to be."

In 1872 the Hawke's Bay Provincial Council passed its Special Settlements Act. This authorised the Council to set aside blocks of land for sale by deferred payment licence in an area from Takapau to Eketahuna. The purchase of land from the Maori, the recruitment of the immigrants, and the early land surveys were carried out in great haste during the period August 1871 through to September 1872.

On 20 September 1872, Norsewood sections were balloted for and one month later the Danish families moved to Dannevirke. The first group of about 240 persons, had, as an introduction to their new life, four days of continuous rain while they sheltered in a slab hut. When these two settlements were named and by whom is uncertain. Conditions were extremely hard. There was little or no experience in bush felling and records

Above: This rural scene on the outskirts of Eketahuna shows little trace of the heavy bush which the first settlers faced. (Photo: Ash Spice)



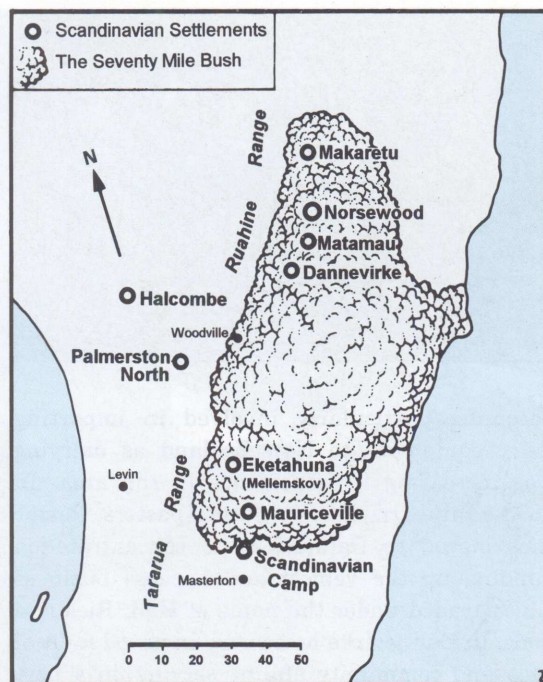
Below: A scene near Eketahuna in the period of bush-burn-ing. (Photo: Alexander Turnbull Library)

show that within four years many had given up the struggle and moved away to join with other Scandinavians elsewhere. The settlement of Eketahuna was established from Wellington and the Forty Mile Bush Camp was set up at Kopuaranga just south-east of Eketahuna. From this camp in 1873, four of the settlers, Anders Anderson, Nis Lund, Anders Olsen and Brent Syversen, set out for the proposed settlement which was to be known as Mellemkov. However, by the late 1870s the name reverted to the original Maori name of Eketahuna. These families were followed by Peterson, Bengston, Jacobsen and Christensen. These were the hardy pioneers who felled the bush, formed the roads and opened up the area for settlement.

There were many notable characters among the early Scandinavian pioneers and the following brief sketches of three may give some idea of the calibre of these settlers.

Bror Erik Friberg was born at Kristianstad in Sweden and he and his wife, Cecilia, decided in 1866 to emigrate to New Zealand where he hoped his special knowledge of forestry would offer new possibilities. In 1871 he was appointed to the Immigration Department as Recruitment Officer and in this position he made four trips to Europe on selection programmes for immigrants from the Scandinavian countries. He was a meticulous government officer, reporting frequently to the Hon. J.D. Ormond and making endless recommendations on behalf of his charges. His work taxed his less than robust frame, his health began to deteriorate and he died in February 1878, aged thirty-nine. His contribution to the selection and settlement of Scandinavians in New Zealand is inestimable. He is interred with his wife at Norsewood.

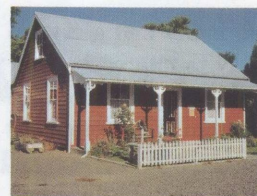
Ole Eriksen was described as "a Scandinavian of exceptional ability who became a leader in his community and beyond". His obituary in 1938



depicted him as a "man among men" and "a pioneer of indomitable spirit". Born in Norway in 1859, he came to New Zealand with his parents in 1872. They moved onto a bush section in Norsewood and began the task of carving out a home. When the Norsewood School was opened in 1874, he was told that he was too old to attend so with great determination he set about educating himself. In 1874 he began work at the local store which eight years later he owned. He became Postmaster, Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages and was deeply involved in community and local body affairs. He was appointed a Justice of the Peace in 1901 and served as the first Chairman of the Dannevirke County Council when it separated from Waipawa County in 1908. His contribution to his community was such that he was honoured in his lifetime and his memory is still venerated in Norsewood.

In the beginning the Lutherans were without a pastor but in 1882 a Lutheran Church was built in Norsewood and during the mid 1880s the Indre Missionen sent five ministers to New Zealand. One of these was Hans Madsen Ries. He was born in the Province of Schleswig, Denmark, and came from a comfortable and well educated background. He considered missionary work in India but poor health persuaded him to accept a call to New Zealand and he arrived in Norsewood in 1886. Two years later a disastrous fire swept through the township destroying shops, houses, the church and the parsonage. Pastor Ries turned his energies to helping reorganise the economic base of Norsewood,

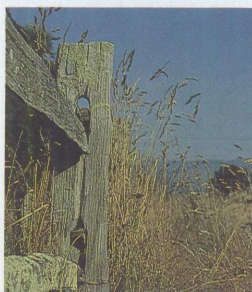




Left: Pastor H.M. Ries is one of this group of Scandinavian pastors. Above: The home of Pastor Ries, built in 1888, now the Norsewood Museum.

Below: A pioneer post and rail fence.

(Photo: Ash Spice)



becoming particularly involved in importing dairy equipment to New Zealand as dairying was increasing in importance in the area. In 1893 on the arrival of two other pastors, Pastor Ries moved to Dannevirke to concentrate on building up the vehicle and harness business which traded under the name of H.M. Ries and Sons. In Dannevirke he became involved in local body and community affairs, serving on a host of local organisations. He became a Justice of the Peace, President of the Evangelical Lutheran Emanuel Convention of New Zealand and Queensland and served two terms as Mayor of Dannevirke. All this as well as running his successful business and doing his work as a

Lutheran minister and a relief preacher for other churches. His contribution to public service was recognised by the presentation first of a gold watch and chain from the burgesses of Dannevirke in 1905 and later of a silver tea service on behalf of the ratepayers of the Borough. He died in 1926. His service was conducted by Pastor Mads Christensen in Danish in the Dannevirke Lutheran Church.

Today the trackless forest to which these people came has been cleared, roaded and populated. For much of this social and geographical revolution the Scandinavian settlers were largely responsible. The histories of these settlements provide glimpses of the privations, the courage and the perseverance of these people. They did not complain; they were not vocal about their struggles and they did not write of their early hardships. It is only now that their descendants have gathered their stories that one can truly depict these settlers who, dogged in the face of hardship, carved out a life for themselves. They were pioneers of indomitable spirit. □

Dorothy Ropiha is chairperson of the Tararua Branch of the New Zealand Historic Places Trust.