

Onga Onga

Village of the Plains,
1872-1975

by
M. C. and E. S. Bibby



Onga Onga, Stinging Nettle

Onga Onga, St

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ONGA ONGA

Over the years, on numerous occasions, we have been asked for information on the history of our district. Being now old identities, it has become apparent to us how little is known and available of the first one hundred years of Onga Onga. On going through old correspondence, we came upon a letter written to us by the late Mr J. G. Wilson, which gave information pertaining to very early settlement of this area. At the bottom of the page was a P.S. suggesting we write a short history of Onga Onga. At the time we felt this was quite beyond our capabilities. We now feel as though we have fulfilled the request of a man we both admired and whose writing we personally have found so useful and interesting. We consider that it was an honour to have been asked to attempt such a project, and have done so to the best of our ability.

M. and E.

M C Bibby
E S Bibby

TE ONGA ONGA (cover)

The stinging nettle that grew at the edge of the bush. The Maoris gave this name to the stream that flows through the village of Onga Onga



Looking across the Onga stream
in pre-bridge days, 1907

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Onga Onga

If you study the map of Central Hawke's Bay, you will see the Ruahine Range in the west and running from there, the two rivers — Tuki Tuki and Waipawa. The land enclosed by these rivers and flanked by the once bush-clad foothills is a large area now known as the Onga riding of the Waipawa county.

In the 1850's, this open country was divided into four large runs — Forest Gate, Fairfield, Mt Vernon and Springhill. The Mate Creek separated Fairfield from Mt Vernon, Springhill ran northwards towards the Waipawa River, and was divided from Forest Gate by the Onga Onga Stream.

Donald McLean was at this time busily engaged in buying land from the Maoris for European settlement. In 1853, it became apparent that these newly-acquired lands would need village centres. Several areas were decided on, and sections were laid out.

One proposed town for the Ruataniwha Plains was called Buckland. The site was on the South Bank of the Waipawa river where the tracks leading from Waipawa met the Hampden (Tikokino) to Takapau track, the road now known as Highway 50.

Quarter acre sections were mapped out, but none were taken up — Mr J. G. Wilson relates that the proposed village of Buckland was again revived in October, 1861, when a Hawke's Bay newspaper advertised residential sections for sale, and reserves for churches, cemetery and slaughter house and parks. Apparently there were no purchasers and the land remained undisturbed in the hands of the run holders.



Main Street, Onga Onga,
1913, looking west

When Springhill was taken up in the early 1850's by George Wogan, it was a block of 8,800 acres, which he stocked with 550 sheep, and three horses. By 1856, Mt Vernon had a flock of 1,920, Fairfield had 1,000 and Forest Gate also 1,000.

Forest Gate

One hundred and twenty years ago, William and John Glenny, who were employed by Mr William Fannin of Fairfield, learned that their parents, brothers and sister would like to emigrate to New Zealand. However, as they would need a home when they arrived, Mr Fannin, in 1857, sold William and John Glenny a small block of land near the Onga Onga stream. Here they set to work to build a colonial house using pitsawn timber.

Mr ~~Robt~~ Glenny, with his wife and children, arrived at Napier in 1858. From there, they had to make a seven-day journey by bullock wagon before reaching their almost completed new home. This was really the first home to be established in Onga Onga. Recently renovated, this house is easily seen from State Highway 50, and at the time of publication is owned by Mr Robert Buchanan.

About 1870, Mr James Newman built a store at the junction of the four tracks from Waipukurau, Waipawa, Takapau and Tikokino, near Highway 50. Soon afterwards, he also built the Sandford Hotel, and these two amenities served the four big stations as well as a few farmlets for some years.



The Onga Onga Hotel,
as it appeared in 1900

Beginnings

In 1872, Mr H. H. Bridge, an Englishman who owned Fairfield, had a village of seventy-eight sections laid out from his property adjoining Newman's land. Mr Bridge was a most public-spirited man, who was anxious to improve the welfare of the village people.

He was instrumental in having seven hundred acres of wheat grown in the Fairfield area. He also built a flour mill, which encouraged further wheat-growing, and provided employment for the first residents in the village.

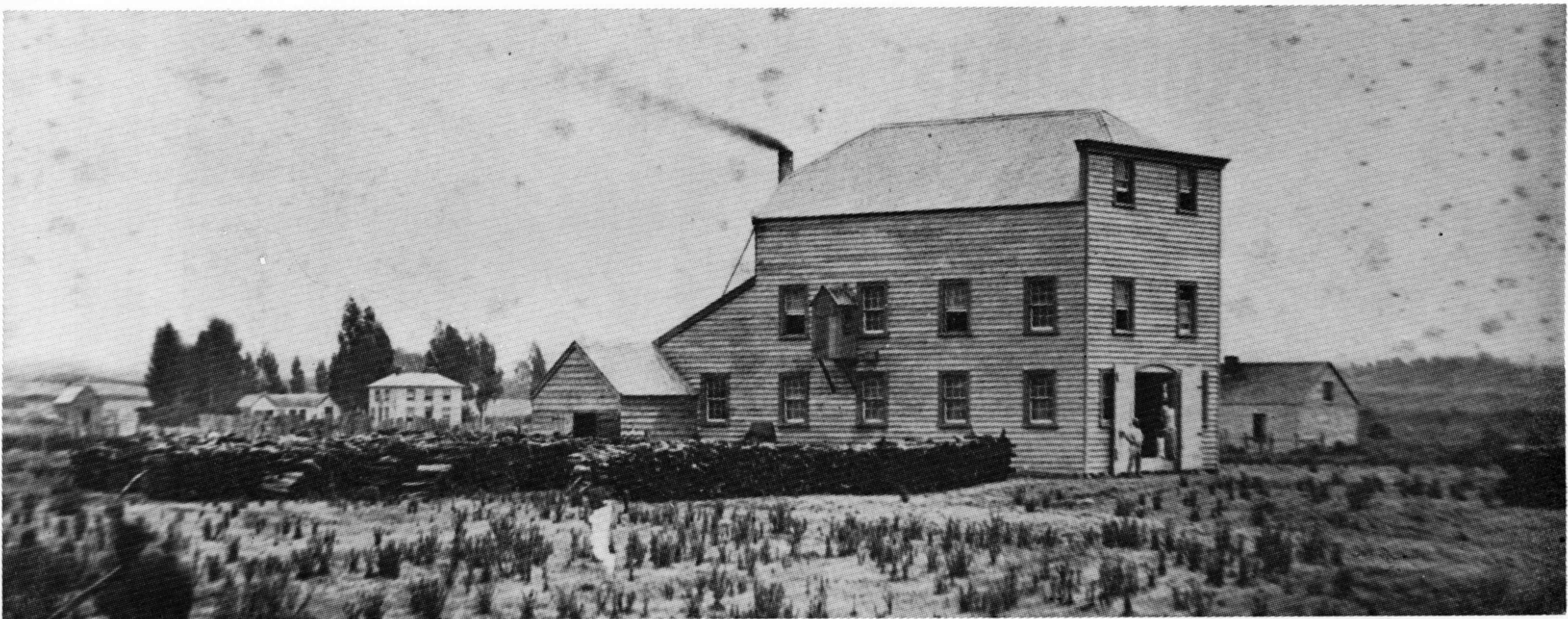
Mr Bridge recognised the need for the settlers' children to obtain an education, so he built a small school, and later on, an interdenominational church.

The land adjoining the school grounds, known as Bridge Park, was also a gift from him for recreational purposes. Today, it has a football field and a tennis court.

After Mr Bridge had laid out a plan for Onga Onga, Mr G. Glenny had an ambitious proposal for an extensive town along Highway 50, and the Ngaruru Road in 1879. However, this venture failed and he sold the sections on the north side of Bridge Street.

In the same year, the small private school came under the newly-formed Hawke's Bay Education Board. The first committee meeting was held that year and Colonel J. L. Herrick was elected chairman.

At this time Church Services were held in the schoolroom occasionally, the ministers travelling by horse and gig from Waipawa and Waipukurau.



Early Onga Onga, 1880.
showing flour mill in foreground
and first hotel, store and
school in background

Early Days

A new store was built on the site next to the present Post Office, and that store is now used as a residence by Mr and Mrs J. Hammon. The storekeeper was Mr Macfarlane, a staunch Scotsman, who combined business with pleasure—his hobby being fireworks. The home-made sieve, part of the equipment with which he used to make the fireworks, can now be seen in the museum. Mr Macfarlane had the Post Office incorporated in his store.

About the time the village was developing, vast areas of bush country lying a few miles to the west and stretching towards the Ruahines, were being broken in and settled. The first area to be broken in lay between the Tuki Tuki River and the Waipawa River and east of Blackburn Ridge.

Opening up this country brought a large number of new families to the district. These families were called on to suffer great hardships in carving out their homes. There were no amenities — no telephones, poor roads and the nearest doctor was a three-hour drive by horse and cart to Waipawa.

About ten years later, further large areas were opened up. These were the Wakarara and Hinerua settlements. Schools were built in each area, the Blackburn school being established in 1889, Wakarara in 1897 and Hinerua in 1909. Children from the new farms in these areas had long distances to walk or ride to school and in some cases, had to cross rivers or travel through standing bush.



Leich's home, built on fringes
of bush, 1880. Pettits Valley

Communications

In the 1890's Hawke's Bay suffered two of the heaviest-known floods. The biggest, in 1893, was in the Onga Onga district. Four years later, one of almost the same magnitude caused heavy loss of life in the Clive district.

These floods showed the apparent danger which could arise from the Onga Onga creek breaking through at the hotel corner and joining up with the Mate creek. At the same time, the Waipawa River nearly succeeded in also joining up with the Mate. In both cases, stopbanks were built, the creeks controlled and danger averted.

About 1890, communications with other areas were improved by the introduction of the telephone service. The Onga Onga Store Post Office was linked to Waipawa and telegrams were able to be sent all over New Zealand.

The telephone lines were extended to the country areas, and Post Offices were established at Blackburn, Wakarara, Makaretu and Ruataniwha. In 1910, a country telephone system was constructed and a few years later, most farms were connected with the Waipawa telephone exchange, which gave a twenty-four hour service.

One of the first linesmen was Mr Carl Lee, who lived in the old school for a few years. He became a well-known character, and the telephone in the museum was gifted by him as a memento of that period.



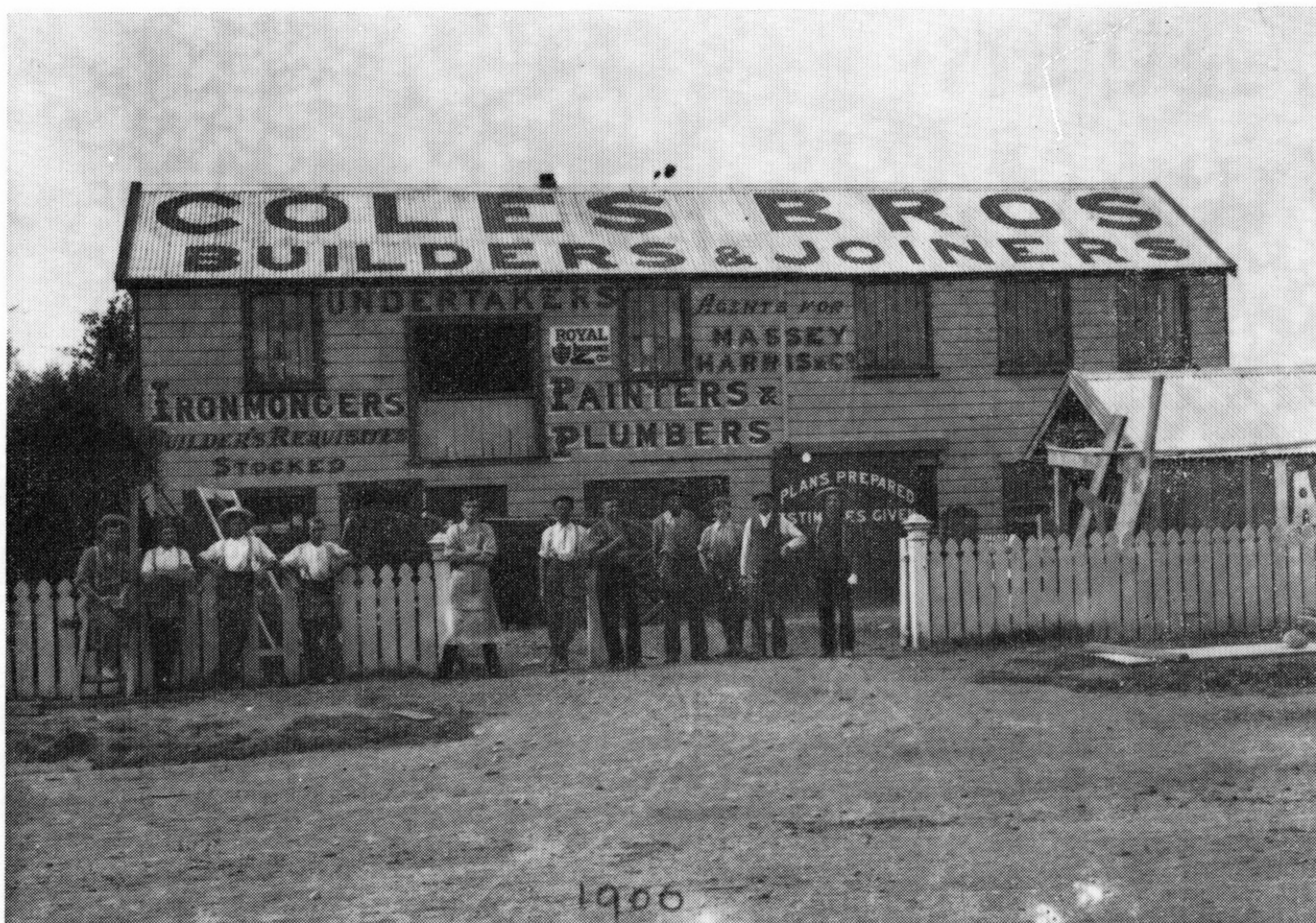
Slab dwelling on
Forest Gate in 1800's

Settlers

Soon, thousands of sheep were grazing where forests had once stood a few years earlier. Small sawmills were working, mainly on burnt-over timber, and later, they mopped up a few remaining areas of virgin bush in Pettits Valley. Later, areas of bush were milled in the Wakarara district. In 1926, the largest one was established on the banks of the Makaroro River by Gardner and Yeoman. This continued to operate successfully until 1956. Around this mill quite a settlement was established and a school for forty children was built.

There are only scrappy records of social life in the early days of Onga Onga. Apparently, race meetings used to be held on the Domain. The local blacksmith was Mr John Drummond, who constructed a totalisator for these meetings at which he raced two good horses. He is also reputed to have made violins and being musical, linked up with the McLeod family at Woodside, Springhill. Together they formed a lively orchestra and had many musical evenings.

Mr Drummond was also a close friend of Reverend William Colenso, and was able to help him by gathering many specimens from this area for his botany collection. Later on, he married Jessie McLeod of Woodside, and they named their first son, William Colenso. The two men corresponded regularly and extracts from their letters can be seen in the museum.



Important Central
Hawke's Bay Builders

In 1877, there arrived from England a Mr Charles Coles, with his wife and twelve children. This large family was to play an important part in the history of the village. Mr Coles was a carpenter by trade, and soon after his arrival in Onga Onga, he developed a large building concern employing seventeen men. He built schools and churches, as well as many large homes throughout Southern Hawke's Bay.

School

A new school was built in 1886 in Mill Street, and the old school became a Roads Board office. It functioned as such for many years, and later was used as a bach for the telephone linesman. Finally, the Country Girls' Club used the building as a meeting room.

In 1965, when there was a likelihood of the old school being demolished, Mrs H. Leach, the then president of the Onga Onga Country Women's Institute, was responsible for calling a public meeting, with the idea of preventing this happening. A group was formed from the people interested in renovating and preserving the old historic building, with Mr E. S. Bibby as chairman.

Numerous pioneer articles, maps and photographs were collected, and in October, 1966, the Old School Museum was opened.



Original home of Glenny family,
built 1858. Continuously used

Access

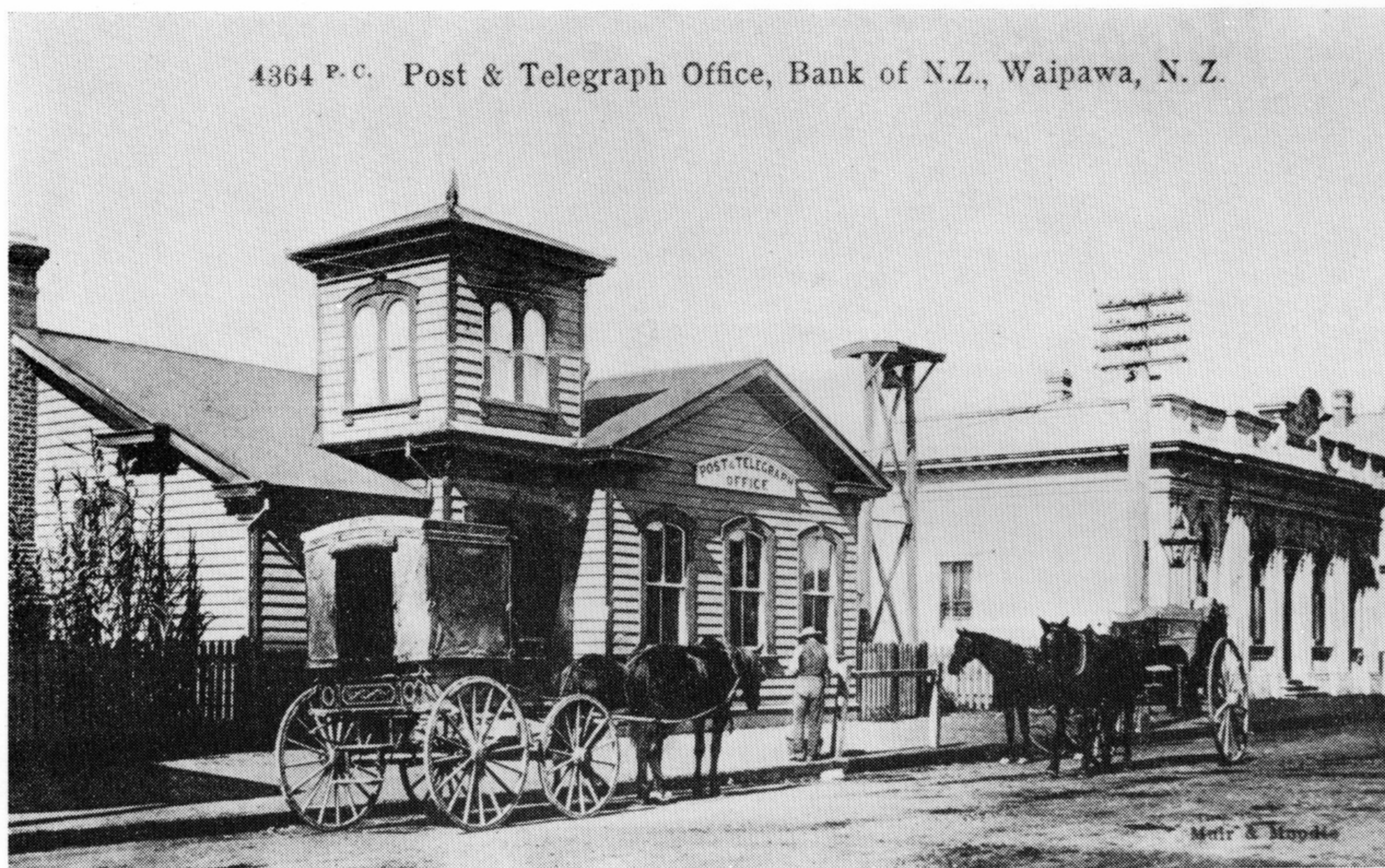
In the early days, access to Onga Onga was made by crossing the river at Waldrom's on the Tikokino Road. The track wended its way past the old stockade at the west of the old Ruataniwha school site, and across the plains to the village. The matter of building a bridge at the ford on the Great North Road, State Highway 2, across the Waipawa River, was under consideration.

The Provincial Council insisted that the bridge must also give access to the Onga Onga and bush country area, as well as providing for traffic going north and south.

A road crossing the lime-works hill was found to be very costly. Determined to overcome this, and reduce the cost of the project, the county engineer, in the early eighty's, laid out a road with a multitude of twists and turns and bends, which was accepted. Strangely enough, it was eighty years before these bends were eliminated.

Onga Onga now had an all-weather road to the new railhead at Waipawa. Large horse-drawn wagons could be seen daily on the road. These were followed at a later date by traction engines and trailers. This Waipawa bridge was re-built in 1910 and later replaced by a fine new bridge lower down the river on State Highway 2.

The first communication with Onga Onga and other centres was by means of a horse and spring cart driven by Mr Tom Waldrom, who brought goods and mail from Waipawa once a week in summer, and fortnightly in winter. Wool and posts, etc, were transported by bullock wagon.



T. J. Beasely's Mail Coach,
which ran twice daily to
and from Onga Onga
(note baker's cart on right)

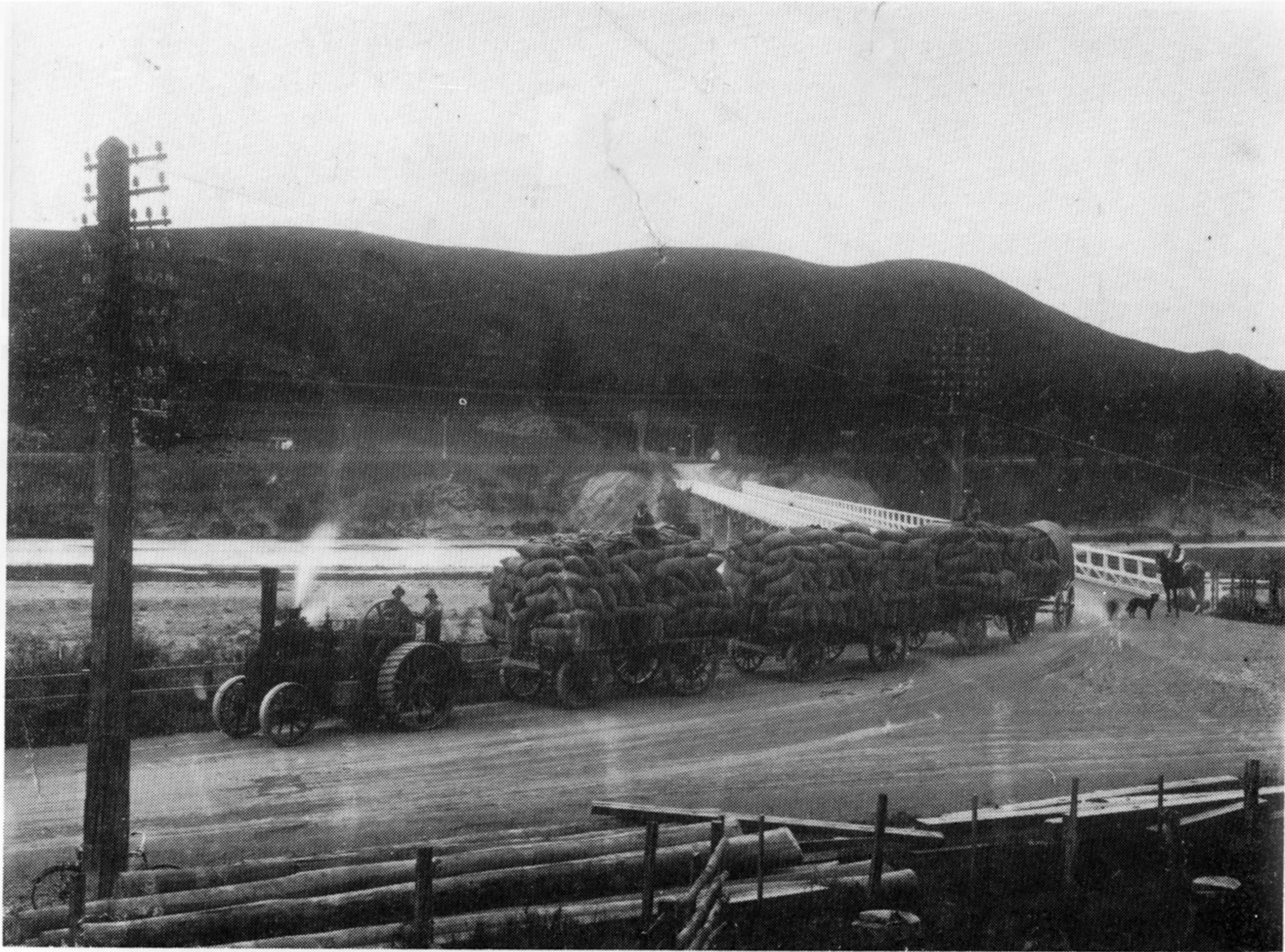
By 1900, this transport was superseded by a covered coach drawn by two horses and running twice daily. Expresses, driven for many years by Mr John Adams, ran three times a week to Blackburn and by Mr Turfrey to Wakarara, in the early 1900's.

In 1912, the Wheelwright factory, owned by Mr Grant, which was situated where our present garage now stands, produced a wonderful coach. This was driven first to Waipawa from Onga Onga daily, and three times a week extended its run to Hinerua. The project, however, was found to be uneconomical and later abandoned.

In 1901, Forest Gate Station was bought by the Government for closer settlement, and cut up into eighteen large farms and twelve, twenty- to forty-acre farmlets. A block of one hundred acres was held as a reserve and became the Forest Gate Domain. Four acres on the Blackburn Road were set aside for a cemetery.

Mr H. H. Bridge commenced to subdivide the northern portion of Fairfield Station in the early '80's. By 1899 all the land north of Black's Creek had new owners.

In 1906, the remaining part of Fairfield was put up for auction.

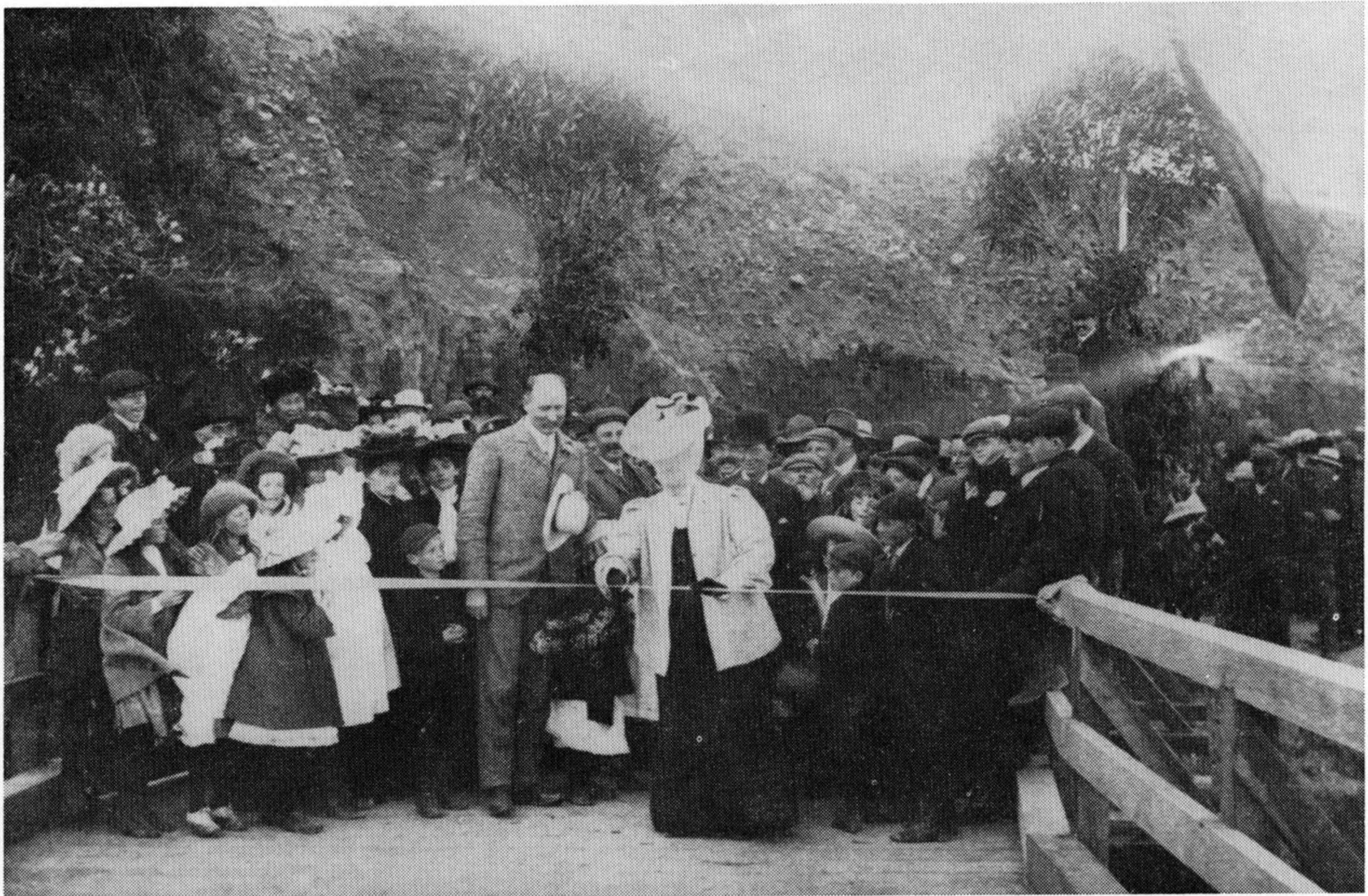


Pilcher's traction engine,
taking chaff to Waipawa rail,
across newly re-constructed
traffic bridge, 1909.

The land along the Tuki Tuki was divided into farms. Near the village were numerous farmlets and building sections.

The Government acquired the Mt Vernon Station in 1904. and had it subdivided. On the light land near Onga Onga, the farms were of up to eight hundred acres, but in Ruataniwha, the areas were smaller and more suitable for dairying.

Saleyards were built in 1901 — three rival sets on either side of the road on Highway 50. To begin with, monthly sales were held, and then fortnightly. The store sheep from the hill country supplied the farms on the plains with their breeding ewes and large numbers of lambs were wintered and re-sold at special hogget fairs in the spring.



Late Mrs A. E. Jull
cutting the ribbon at the
Opening of Tuki Tuki bridge, 1910

The name of Harry Buchanan was synonymous with the saleyards, as he was stock agent for many years with Williams and Kettle, and later, Hawke's Bay Farmers. He was responsible for selling more stock than any other agent, and was a well-known character in the district.

A number of small farms turned to dairying, resulting in a butter factory being built at Onga Onga. Supplies for this factory also came from Ruataniwha and Wakarara.

Many of these farms lacked a good water supply, so plans were made to construct water races from the Tuki Tuki and Waipawa rivers. These races greatly improved production in the area.

With the advent of motor transport, it became necessary to bridge a number of the rivers. Among the earliest was that across the Tuki Tuki in 1910. Then the Onga Onga creek was bridged at the hotel and Pettits Valley Road, and later, the Onga-Tiko, and two more on the Waipukurau Road.

Growth

The village grew and prospered with many new businesses springing up — seventeen in all. There were tea rooms, supper rooms, a fruiterer, tailor, baker, butcher, barber and a shoe shop. Three stores, two blacksmiths, a boarding house and a large building firm were thriving, as well as transport stables and a contract threshing plant, complete with traction engine.

Mr H. H. Bridge had an interdenominational church built in 1904. In 1908, the Roman Catholics built their church, and a little later, in 1910, a Presbyterian Minister took up residence in the village. A manse was given to him and a church was built in 1917. The need for a community centre arose and money was raised for this purpose. A group of subscribers became shareholders and a good hall was built in 1900. This hall is still in use, although it has now been taken over by the Waipawa County Council. In the village at this period there were tennis and football clubs. Plans were afoot for a cycling club at Bridge Park. For many years, a brass band functioned, and a number of the original band instruments are now on display in the museum. A very large Horticultural and Industries Show was also held annually from 1916 to 1956. This created much interest in the whole district, and neighbouring schools were given a half holiday for the occasion.

Springhill, the last of the original runs, was surveyed and divided into fifteen farms, which were balloted in 1914. These farms ranged from three hundred to six hundred acres, but a number of them had very light soils. This meant that the establishment of permanent English pastures created a very real problem, which seemed insurmountable.



Sam Carr's threshing plant
in operation at Onga Onga

However, early in 1920, a Scotsman named Mr James Caldwell persevered with an expensive new seed (twenty-six shillings a pound) known as subterranean clover. His efforts were rewarded, and a few years later, with the use of superphosphate, carrying capacity was increased six-fold.

This created a new era for light soils in Ruataniwha, as well as in other parts of New Zealand. Later, with the introduction of New Zealand's own invention — the giant discs — an easier method was found to regrass the high country.

In 1909, a resident policeman was stationed in the village. He not only maintained law and order in Onga Onga, but he also supervised Tikokino and the western area of the district. The long-promised police station did not eventuate for about fifty years, and the constable had to live in a rented house. Subsequently a police Station residence was built, and once again the old portable lock-up and office was moved onto the same site. But this was used for only three years, as a change in policy took policemen from country areas, and the house was sold to the Education Board. It is now occupied by the headmaster of the local school.

The Great War

The Great War, 1914 to 1918, drew many young men from the district, and brought a setback to progress. Added to this was the tremendous improvement in roading with better and more powerful cars. Consequently, many of the smaller businesses were forced to close, and the village almost dwindled away.

An attempt was made in 1920 to counter the drift to the larger centres by forming a Progressive Society. This organisation ran a very successful Queen Carnival, which raised enough money to enlarge the hall and build a library.

In 1931, the Country Women's Institute held a series of card evenings, and with the profits, a chimney was built in the supper room. During World War II the Women's Institute put all their energies into knitting socks and balaclavas, and baking cakes and shortbread for our overseas soldiers' parcels. Mrs Len Carr, the then secretary, ably assisted by her husband, packed and despatched all overseas parcels. Much good work was done, but like many other small townships, Onga Onga was unable to withstand the economic pressures of the times.

In 1926, a number of Hydro Stations were coming into production throughout New Zealand. A main transmission line was brought through Hawke's Bay, and a sub-station was constructed at Onga Onga. A large rural area received the benefits of power shortly afterwards under a system of guarantee, wherein a district agreed to a minimum consumption of power. Electricity was extended first to Springhill, and then to Blackburn Road, and later to Pettits Valley Road. The last major extension was to the Blackburn and Hinerua areas in 1957.



OPENING OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AT ONGA ONGA. 16.4.1909.
(W. GOLDBER, Photo.)

This really marked the closing of an era, and the end of a pioneering, or non-mechanical age. Tractors were now seen on most farms, and nearly every farmer owned a car and had his own woolshed and shearers' quarters, and tractor and truck.

The saleyards which had been the centre of a successful enterprise, closed down in 1959.

Onga Onga Today

On the site of the former saleyards, UEB has built a large new lucerne-processing factory. The plant handles lucerne from local growers, transforming it into high protein pellets or meal for New Zealand and export markets.

Instead of the once busy little town of long ago, we now have only one store, one garage, one hotel and the Post Office. There are still two small building concerns, a timber mill and a post and batten treatment plant.

Another new school has replaced the second school, and a school bus has replaced the ponies. Secondary schoolchildren are now transported from country areas to the Central Hawke's Bay College at Waipukurau.

Many organisations continue to function. There is an active golf club, as well as cricket, football and indoor bowling clubs. The play centre, guides, scouts and brownies cater for young people, while a modern school, with swimming baths, a fire brigade, a library and the same three churches provide amenities for the residents.

All the bush-covered hills have been cleared, and are now tidy, well-cultivated farms, reaching from the mountains to the plains. Farmers are much more progressive, and have up-graded their homes. Their well-appointed properties are highly mechanised and bear little resemblance to the country where fern and tussock once flourished.

As you approach Onga Onga travelling south, there appears the attractive war memorial nestling among beautiful flowering shrubs and trees— a tribute to many young men who died in the wars.

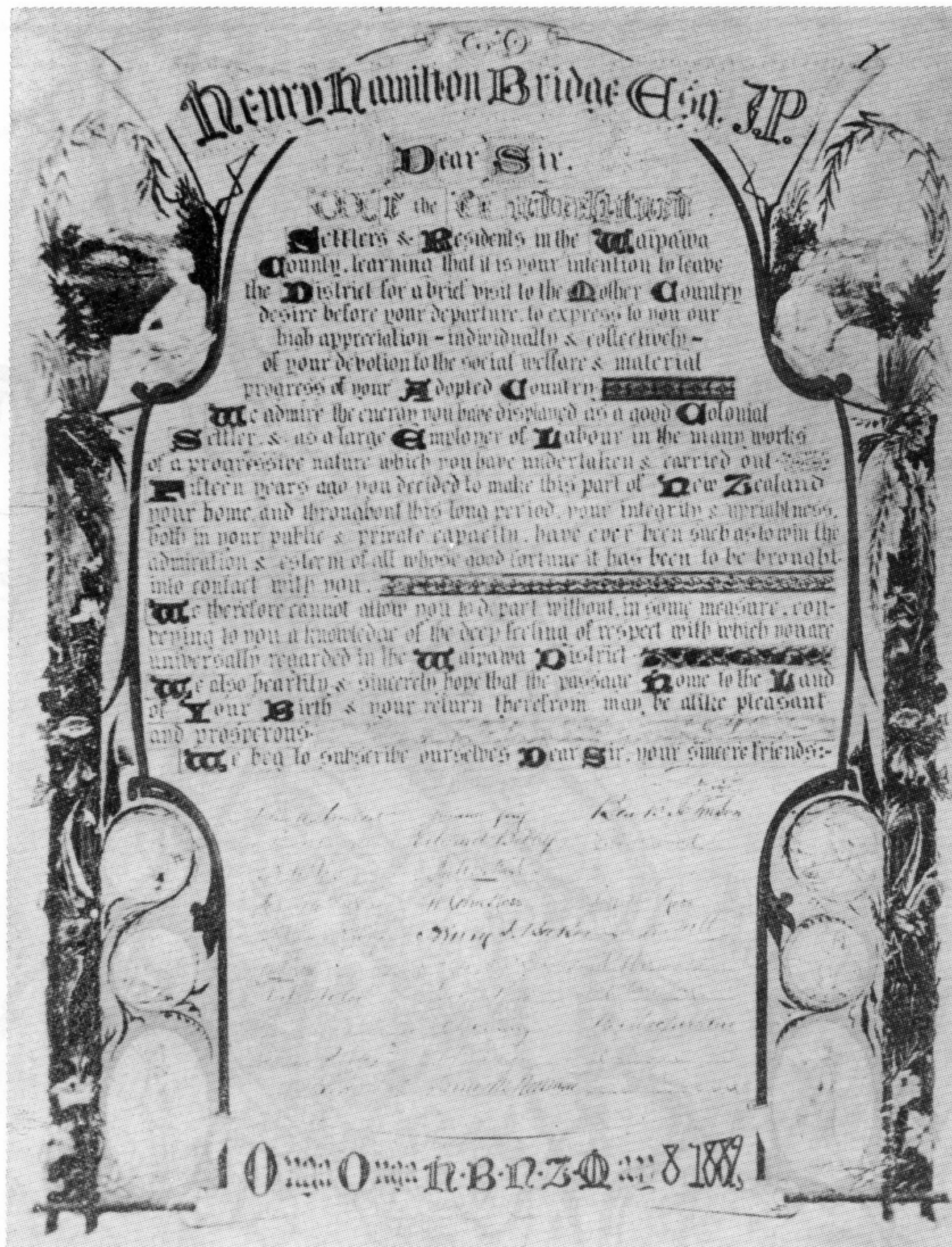


The Brass Band
which functioned for
many years in the village

The last building on the left before crossing the bridge is the little old school, now known as the Old School Museum, which contains maps, pictures, books and other relics of the past.

About a mile further south, there is the well-laid out and beautifully planted Forest Gate Domain. Sports meetings are still held there annually, and incorporated in the grounds is one of the best nine-hole golf courses in Hawke's Bay.

So much for the forethought of our forefathers!
Have we added any legacies?



Illuminated address presented to Mr H. H. Bridge, and signed by the leading citizens of the district. Signatures are.

Harry A. Lambert
 N. H. Ross
 Arthur Glenny
 E. P. Coles
 Andrew Guy
 Edward Bibby

W. J. Ross
 Henry S. Baker
 Alex Inglis
 James M. Newman
 Ben Johnston
 E. Harwood

H. Hill
 N. Harwood
 B. Macfarlane
 A. Hope

SETTLEMENT OF ONGA ONGA RIDING IN 1850's

