

Battling the big wet of Anzac 1938

Hawke's Bay writer Elizabeth Hill (author of the oral history of Hawke's Bay *Between the Rivers*), was nearly 18 on Anzac weekend, 1938, when she set off with her mother, artist Beatrice Harvey, for a painting expedition into the countryside. Here she recounts her arduous journey back to Napier after heavy rains which drowned the Esk Valley in water and mud, stranding them both in Te Pohue.

I'd hate to be a harbinger of doom, but when a certain type of rain such as we had in Havelock North in February this year imitated a glass curtain, my mind flickered back to Anzac Day weekend, April 1938, some 64 years ago. Then, the self-same type of rain hit the ground like a solid sheet in Taupo-Tokaanu — not cold, not hall — then bounced back up, to return like a yo-yo.

On the Thursday prior to that historic, fateful Anzac Day weekend, my mother and I had jaunted forth for a few innocent days of painting the autumn colours at Tokaanu.

From the windows of our rented bach at Turangi we watched this veritable monsoon pelting down to form lakes on the section. It took the urge of necessity to throw a raincoat over the head and sprint to the little hut in the mamaku. The Tongariro River was very loud in our ears.

Friday was no better, no autumn tints, only grey-green in the incessant downpour. We drove out onto the road, already awash, to the Bridge Lodge, Turangi, to get a forecast. Our wireless in the bach would only receive a concert programme from Christchurch.

We were advised to "get out fast", and the ominous absence of fishermen's cars, or waders and rods on the huts' verandas, proved their point. No fishing today. Someone who'd heard the forecast, and with local knowledge, urged us to return to Napier via Palmerston North, or our road between Turangi and Taupo would be closed by rising streams. No-one mentioned possible conditions from

Taupo to Napier, so we decided to take the risk.

But we waffled about, and failed to leave until early Saturday morning, hoping it would clear, then set off for Taupo; two quite intelligent women minus a glimmer of sense regarding petrol engines which have stood out in a torrent for 36 hours, not to mention extraordinary weather prospects!

The flooded Waiotaka Stream made nonsense of memories of delightful trout pools in which to cast a line. Instead, the water was up to the running board and formed a sizeable lake on both sides.

At the Taupo turnoff we heaved a sight of relief, but we hadn't seen another car, which should have been warning enough, nor did we inquire at the petrol station for news, but carried blindly on, thankful to have got that far.

It was after we'd passed the empty parking area outside the Rangitaiki pub (the river there was almost over the bridge) that the family Chev began to protest at the wet, stalling. I fiddled with knobs and things and miracle of miracles she started again. (It was our first closed-in car after the old Vauxhall tourer '23/60, and we were deeply grateful for glass windows replacing canvas and talc side-curtains.)

A large truck overtook us, fast — its wheels throwing up jets of mud and water. By then we both had a presage of disaster, but it was unspoken.

At the Tarawera Hotel, two-thirds of the way home now, the same truck was the only vehicle parked — a driver with more sense than us. Even then we didn't go in



DEBRIS from the rain-swollen Esk River piled up outside the railway station in 1938.

to ask the news.

Talk about innocents abroad! Where were the regulars from the mill, coming in for their Saturday knees-up?

The decline to the Mohaka bridge was slithery with streamlets gouging the metal road. We could see the now mighty Mohaka River and hear its roar reverberating through the canyon.

Turning the elbow bend onto the decades-old deck of this suspension bridge, we saw below our favourite picnic spot, churning brown rapids several feet deep. Actually, in hindsight, we were probably safer here than anywhere on the Taupo road. This old wooden structure had survived the Hawke's Bay earthquake and still had many feet clearance of the water, but it shook, and so did we, when Chevvie conked out slap-bang in the middle.

The first car to come up behind us held the late Frank Fryer with daughter, Zoe (the late Mrs Guy Barron) and two large black labradors. We had our Jimmy, a largish samoyed. Like us, the Fryers were hurrying back to Napier. Soon it was a procession, three or four more cars, their owners' names forgotten, others arriving including three young deershooters. Combined muscle-power shoved the Chev off the bridge, there to remain for weeks with all our belongings — clothes, painting gear, food — safe as the Bank of England on that road to nowhere. No time to grab spare clothes, let alone a toothbrush.

Mum and I were distributed with Jimmy in the convoy. From the high escarpment large stones were curving out over us into the river, followed by

heavier ammunition, closer but luckily badly aimed.

No time was wasted in climbing that steep traverse pursued by yellowy clay slides, the last cars to get that far from the Mohaka in months.

Tiokokura Saddle lay ahead, and so did increasing avalanches. One by one each car was abandoned and we were all on foot. It grew darker. Someone had a torch and at one stage it shone on Frank Fryer's legs, trousers rolled above the knees, as he battled across a moving river of ochrous mud, with Mum pig-a-back. Soon there was no road surface, just mud, mud, glorious mud and the continuous rumble of avalanching hillsides complete with uprooted trees from bush or plantation. This noise I had originally thought to be thunder —

but thunder without lightning? No lightning flashes to pick out the outline of a hill. No farmhouses in those days to beacon sanctuary from a lighted window.

The men went into huddles often to discuss direction. Frank Fryer and the deershooters (one of whose name was Peanuts), with the late Tony Mayne, all knew the road well under normal conditions.

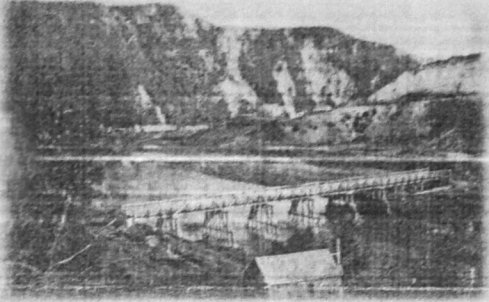
I'd give a lot to remember how we got through the night but we did. I hazard a guess that our bodies held the genes of pioneering explorers. Hours later a shout from a distance was loud enough to stop our dragging feet. Someone answered, then came a "coo-ee!" a torch or lantern shone the direction, bobbing towards us — rescue! A search party from Te Pohue out to find stranded people like us.

We were finally "welcomed" by the proprietor of the pub, not overjoyed at the invasion of yet more refugees. Most of our party had little or no spare clothes or shoes. There was a bathroom but no hot water, no hot food or drink on offer. The company in the bar lounge now numbered about 30. No available beds, mattresses, pillows or rugs; a few chairs only, and Mum was given one, as the eldest in her 60s. The most vivid memory of that dawn (or any other dawn for that matter) in that inhospitable room is the stale smell of beer and tobacco on best Axminster where I laid my head to sleep every night for a week. A rose by any other name... but we were safe.



MUD and silt cover the Esk Valley after the flooding.

PICTURES: HB CULTURAL TRUST



ABOVE: The old wooden Mohaka bridge.

The big wet of Anzac 1938

From day one, as in a German prisoner of war camp, which in little more than a year could hold Peanuts and his friends, the prime motive was to escape the Te Pohue pub and get home. Rain and thundering hill-slides never ceased for the first two days and nights, scary and menacing.

Our first official visit from the proprietor (Prop from now on) took the form of an address. Dressed in a navy suit for receiving guests, collarless shirt, brown hat and without his teeth, he didn't ooze traditional hospitality. His mumbings included information on meals, hot baths, bar and behaviour (which I now suspect covered "goings on", and were mostly unavailable or strictly rationed).

After a Council of War a diplomatic truce was put forward by our escape committee, and a roster drawn up for priority with firstly hot baths, sleeping arrangements and such. Some rugs were provided, pillows, even a hot water bottle, and sheets to curtain off a corner for women's privacy.

Lack of communication with the outside world was the worst frustration. We all sat around trying to get to know each other. There were some miserable fares. We were fed somehow, with what I forget, but we were informed bread was running low. The Te Pohue store helped out all they could. It was

possible to dash out and buy some biscuits for the children, who were unnaturally quiet cooped up like that, still dumb-struck by the total experience.

A sigh of relief went up when Prop opened the bar, and he was almost smiling when he rattled the till. He had his teeth in by now. Sunday's and Monday's weather was slightly less vengeful than Saturday's. Nerve-shaking to listen to a night but I had a pillow now and Mum was fixed up with a rug. There were some tears, shushing of children, comforting, and even a few giggles in the dark. Tuesday morning brought some window light, which lifted spirits somewhat. Thea good news. Mr McKeesick of Rukumoaana Station, some miles away, had fixed his private phone line and all were welcome to use it. The children and dogs almost exploded up the hill shouting and barking for joy. The devastation in front of the pub alone was a shattering sight, even to those of us who thought we'd seen it all — but not in daylight. Little Lake Te Pohue had merged with a huge mud crater that was once the road turning the bend to King's Orchard. When we reached the top of the first hill, by which time the rain had stopped, sun coming through, we could see even though the clouds hung over distant hills, mile after mile of devastation. Stark brown slopes, treeless except for an occasional

stalwart clump clinging there.

Mrs McKeesick's kitchen was so clean, warm and bright we scruffies were ashamed at first to enter. Children and dogs outside! The smell of hot scones made me reel with hunger. Mrs McKeesick must have been baking since dawn.

One by one we successfully got through on that crackling line, instructed by our kind hostess how to crank the handle. Mum got hold of Dad at work, and that was the first time for days I had seen her really smile. Mid-week, a Gypsy Moth bi-plane barn-stormed the pub and had us all outside waving and cheering, watching for the food drop the men had arranged over the McKeesicks' phone. The huge pack landed with an audible thump followed by several Red Cross parcels. The men raced for them and however squashed (no sliced bread then fortunately), bread was bread.

With more settled weather and drying ruid, escape plans went ahead. I hiked over the hills with the deer hunters and was taught to use a 303.

Now Mum had more worries, but it was Peanuts (the only name I remember) and his mates who reconnoitred and planned our route cross country via Rissington to Napier. I had been invited to go with them. What excitement!

The night before they left, however, I was asked by a school teacher (on Mum's

THE washed-out remains of the Waikou Bridge after the 1938 Anzac weekend floods.

guessed), to have a little chat — in the bathroom. We sat side by side on the edge of the bath while deeply embarrassed, I meekly listened to a

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type of "birds and bees" story, waiting for him to come to the point. I took the hint and stayed behind with Mum.

On the appointed day, one week from our arrival, the full party set off in sunshine. The Fryers with their dogs took a more direct route down the Esk Valley, six feet deep in mud in places. We passed the Dempsey's Eland Station to reach

our night stop, the Dole Camp where we were expected, the bush telegraph having been busy.

We shared their meal, sitting on long benches at scrubbed wooden tables, devouring heavenly mutton stew, spuds, onions and camp-oven bread.

Our host politely introduced us to washing and sleeping facilities, including the long-drop, to which Mum and I were no strangers. We topped-and-tailed on a single bunk. I kept my now stiff-as-a-board socks on, it was so cold, and one gray blanket did little to lift the mercury.

Welcome dawn and good hot porridge with mugs of strong tea. I learned that the workmen had shared bunks in order to give up their mattresses, otherwise we'd have "slept" on wire-wove. We made our goodbyes with grateful thanks and were on our way, Jimmy with a large mutton shank.

The "road" was off-again-on-again with wearisome obstacles, but the bongo-drums were still active. At the junction of the Taupo Road with a back-country road to the west, a man appeared on a horse (the late Michael White)

carrying shearers' bills of hot tea, and a couple of 50lb flour bags full of hot buttered scones, from the nearby farm. Standing around on the road in the sun, farmers and their wives to talk to. It was more like an "al fresco" morning tea party.

We walked and slithered over hills towards Rissington. I wondered why a farmer leading two beautiful grey thoroughbred Clydesdales walked beside us, but in the afternoon as we scrambled down the last hillside and saw the Mangaone River in full spate, the penny dropped. The farmer explained. Tony Mayne and I, the only riders in the group, were to ferry our friends over one or two at a time, then (if we all got there) leave the horses which would return in due course. Just bridles, no saddles, on backs as broad as kitchen tables. The water was up to Bluey's belly as I took my first passenger across; the current which swept Jimmy (the lion) out of sight never fazed him.

Mum was almost my undoing. Petrified of horses (both ends were dangerous and the middle unsafe) she was hoisted up by Tony and

grappled me round the waist in desperation.

Bluey slid his forelegs down the steep bank while Mum pushed me up his neck. I screamed to her to get back while I clung to thick grass. Bluey righted himself by sitting on the bank and pushing off with his rump. Now we all were safe, laughing in our relief. Jimmy reappeared at a gallop. Mum was still shaking.

I made much of Bluey, thanking him and his partner for what I see now as a miracle. He rubbed his beautiful head against me, saying (translated) "Think nothing of it. All in a day's work".

A few hundred yards or so away we could see Rissington School. The party limped forward on blistered feet, blue toes, cut paws, twisted ankles and knees with technicolour bruises.

Who should be there to meet Mum and me but a grinning Peanuts with her two-seater Buick (Bonny and Clyde model). No less than 13 hikers fitted in (four in the front) or on, running boards, mud-guards, dickey seats, to Napier. The road was more like a battlefield after the flood.

PICTURES: HB CULTURAL TRUST