

THE ORIGINS OF THOMAS HOUSE

Joidah Edward Thomas was born on September 9, 1856 in Birmingham, son of a Welshman, Jabez Edward Thomas. He came to New Zealand with his parents Jabez and Eliza and only brother in 1873 and settled in Auckland where soon after he met and married Alice Helena Fenton who had been born in Melbourne in 1857

The couple spent their first years together at Waipukarau, where their first of eight sons, William was born; and in Ponsonby, Auckland, where Maude, Frank, Arthur, and Lillian were born at roughly two-yearly intervals.

In 1887 the Thomas family left Auckland by the coastal ship 'Oriti' from Onehunga in search of a new life and prosperity at Herekino, between Hokianga Harbour and Ninety Mile Beach and then only a name in a land settlement scheme in virgin bush. Neither parent had any training or experience to help them with the rigorous life ahead. Alice had been a gently bred girl, brought up in a family where maids were part of the household, and Joidah had started his working life as a bookkeeper. Lillian was a toddler of two years, still being breast fed by her mother and William was left in Auckland in hospital with a leg injury when the move was made. He made a complete recovery and joined the family some months later.

The family landed at Whangape Harbour and were given shelter for the night in a Maori meeting house. Next morning Maoris ferried them across the harbour in canoes and they were guided through the bush to the land on which they were to make their home for four arduous, adventurous years. When they arrived, carrying their bare necessities, friendly Maoris helped to build them a whare of light branches and nikau palm fronds.

The Government was supposed to pay the settlers for bush felling and road building but money was a scarce commodity in those tough years and a solution was found at the gum fields near Ahipara, about nine miles away over hilly country. Men, and boys strong enough to dig, camped on the gum fields at the southern end of Ninety Mile Beach, exchanging gum for food at the general stores in the area and tramping home to Herekino with their heavy loads of essential provisions as often as possible.

It is hard to visualise such a life in these comfortable times; but it is not hard to imagine that the burden placed on the women folk in such circumstances was great indeed.

After four years of struggle at Herekino, and the birth of another son, Alfred, the decision was made to move further north to a new block of gum-bearing land being settled at Houhora Harbour where the family could be together.

In 1891 the Thomas household effects were sent by bullock dray to Awanui and the eight members of the family set off on borrowed horses after them. After an overnight stay at Awanui, the family boarded the coastal ship 'Staffa' for Houhora, arriving to find interested Maoris paddling about in their canoes, just as they had in Whangape Harbour four years earlier. Today the trip from Herekino to Houhora takes less than one hour.

A few days after the difficult journey, Alice gave birth to her seventh child, Harold; a Maori midwife officiating in a newly-pitched tent. At the midwife's request, the baby's second name became Tahana after her husband.

A home was eventually built about fifty yards back from the edge of the sandstone cliff which faces towards the eastern shore of Houhora Harbour.

The family grew to eleven children with the birth of Bert in 1893, Hazel 1896, Joy 1898 and Ernie in 1905.

Four years after settling at Houhora, a school was established and for many years the men who succeeded Alice as her childrens' teacher were part of the family establishment. The gumfields continued to attract diggers and the settlement at Houhora grew to a peak of about two thousand people. With the increased activity in the area the Northern Steam Ship Company decided to open an agency to handle trade and Joidah was appointed as the agent. A wharf was built just below the house, largely by his sons' own efforts.

A Post Office was the next new activity and it was housed in the room which had been the family's kitchen-dining area but later it became semi-detached from the house. It was named Pukenui after a nearby landmark but was known locally by the English equivalent, "Big Hill".

Joidah was appointed Post-Master and, about the same time, Justice of the Peace, acting occasionally as Coroner or presiding over a rare session of Court.

A small General Store was developed from the Post Office and an agency gained from a department store in Auckland, additional roles for Alice to cope with as well as being wife, mother, chief midwife and medical advisor to the district and Sunday School to name only the more obvious of her talents. Even cultural matters were not entirely neglected.

On an memorable day, a piano arrived at the wharf and was carried up the cliff as a surprise for Alice, who in spite of her protests that she'd forgotten everything in the years of toil, sat down and played the Maiden's Prayer for her delighted family. After that, music became a regular part of family life and at one stage a piccolo and violin joined in the music-making.

In 1911, twenty-five years after the family set off for the unknown north, it was decided to return to Auckland where life would be a little less strenuous for Alice. By that time Lillian and Maude were married and three of the brothers had already left Pukenui and were working based in Auckland.

The move was made and home became Disraeli Street, Mt Eden. Because of the Shipping Agency, Joidah remained at Pukenui living in the house alone until 1916 when his daughter Lillian and her husband and family moved in, taking over the running of the establishment. Joidah moved south and became Branch Manager for the Northern Steam Ship Company at Te Aroha, a position which involved catching a steamer at Auckland and sailing via Thames and Paeroa up the river to Te Aroha; an overnight trip.

The Thomas Store, Post Office and Shipping Agency was run for the next nine years at Thomas House until the family moved to the south side of Pukenui Hill in 1925. They continued to run the Pukenui Post Office in this new location until 1967.

Business had declined rapidly by this time and the three small Post Offices within a radius of six miles at Walhopo, Houhora and Pukenui were replaced by a modern Central Post Office at Houhora (on the corner of Sale Yard Road). This was later moved back to Pukenui in 1984, and finally closed by the Government of the day in 1987.