

STORIES FROM WAITUNA

First-hand accounts
of life at Waituna



The stories in this web book are rich, first-hand accounts of people's experiences at Waituna. They have been sourced from the 2011 Environment Southland report "A Changing Environment: Recollections of the Waituna Lagoon and Catchment" by Juliet Larkin.

The report features a range of recollections from people who have a long connection with the catchment and lagoon. Their stories and anecdotes were gathered to gain a broader picture of what the Waituna Lagoon and catchment was like in the early days, mostly from the 1950s to the 1980s, before scientific monitoring began. The stories help bring the human context to changing values and concerns about the unique Waituna environment and its ecology.

Most of the recollections were recorded as snippets of information under topic headings, however there are four complete stories and they form the basis for this web book.

- *'Duck Hunting Traditions Remain Strong' (Jim Watson and Roger McNaughton)*
- *'Recollections of Floundering and Lagoon Openings at Waituna' (Ewen Pirie)*
- *'Powerful Forces of Nature at Work at Waituna' (Allan Henderson)*
- *'Waituna's Changing Land Use Benefits Farmers' (Ray Matthews)*

Acknowledgements

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DUCK SHOOTING TRADITIONS STAY STRONG

Jim Watson and Roger McNaughton

The light is dim, the décor is a hodgepodge dating back over the decades, and various mementos line the fireplace. It's hard not to soak up some of the Waituna duck hunting traditions, sitting with Roger McNaughton and Jim Watson in the Watson family's cosy hut beside Lake Waituna. Outside it's sunny but a brisk breeze, not so much inviting, but challenging one to step outside and venture out onto the lake and surrounds.

Roger and Jim, who are distantly related, started hunting when they were 15 and are part of unbroken family traditions of hunting and fishing on Lake Waituna. Roger says his great grandfather was hunting and fishing from the early 1900's and that it possibly started with his pioneering great great grandfather, who moved to the Waituna district in 1901.

Even the Watson family's hut reflects the rich history of the area. They bought it by auction in 1956. It belonged to Charles Hanson, one of the earliest characters of Waituna, who farmed on land between the lagoon and the sea. He kept his Model T Ford in the shed.

Like other duck hunting families in the area, they inherited their duck hunting positions from their fathers and will do the same with the next generation. Jim says spending time there is about learning about nature, mucking about in boats and camaraderie with the people that return year after year.



A 50-year celebration photo - 50 years or more of duck shooting at Waituna. Taken near the Watson's hut, at the start of the big lake. (From L-R) Paddy McNaughton, Tommy Waghorn, Gordon Watson and David McNaughton.



A celebration of 50 seasons of duck shooting at Waituna. Taken at the Watson family hut. (Jim Watson is taking the photo in centre of the image).

“It’s not so much the bags of game or the number of fish really. While everything leads up to taking a fish or collecting a duck which, when we were 15 or 16 we just wanted to chase ducks all over the lake, now it’s a lot of the preparation and the scheming, but also the meeting up of huts and the social side of things.”

Roger says: “We first started coming here as little nippers and people say, ‘why do you like coming here?’ I can’t tell you why I’m so passionate about the place, but my little Brendon (grandson) is probably the fifth or sixth generation of the family to come here and they all love it. Quietly you’re influenced by the place and it’s sort of instilled in you and you pass it on to your family and grandchildren.”

Both say they’ve seen many changes since they’ve been coming to the area, especially the lake in the last four or five years. The lake has silted up more, the water is murky and brownish, whereas it used to be dark, like tea, but clear, and Ruppia beds from the seventies have disappeared.

They, like many others who come here, are concerned about the problems the lagoon is facing and the potential it could ‘flip’ into a deadened state. Roger, who grew up on a farm in the catchment and is involved in working on a dairy farm at Mokotua, is well aware of the huge development that has transformed the region into productive farms, as well as recent land intensification in dairying.

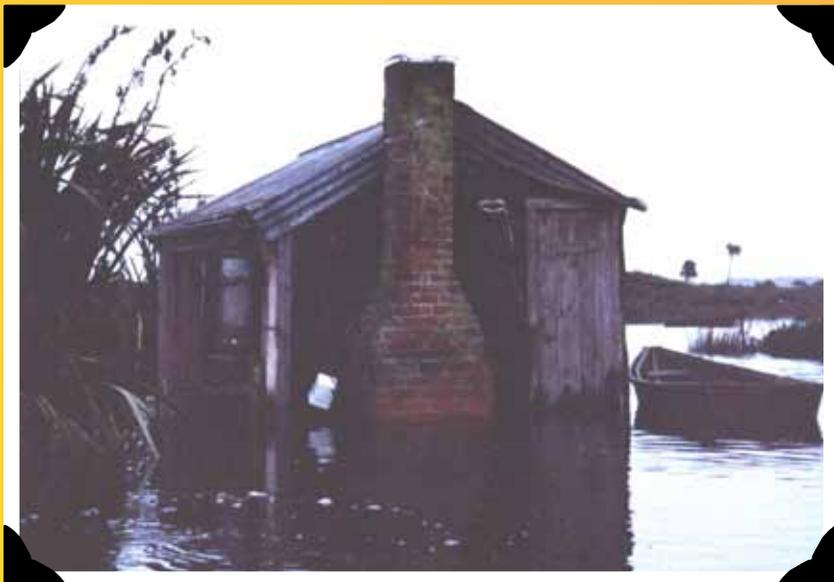
MCNAUGHTON FAMILY PHOTOS...



75th anniversary of 'Stagger Inn'.



Out on the lagoon.



'Stagger Inn' underwater after the level in Waituna Lagoon rose after flooding in the catchment.



After another flood - access bridge is almost entirely underwater.

He remembers as a child seeing draglines coming up the creek and also having to help dig ditches and cart tiles for drains. "You know, it was a terrible job. You'd struggle through all the bloody sticks and scrub and stuff, one tile at a time and put it beside the ditch, walk back out to the tractor and get another one and walk back."

In recent years he estimates he has laid 35km a year of drainage piping. But he believes that the tile drain system, which has successfully transformed many farms from swamp into productive land, has been to the detriment of Waituna. He says even if the farming community reduces the amount of nutrients it puts on the land he doesn't think it is going to save the lagoon because of the run-off from the tile drain system.

Although Waituna has complex problems he says a land purchase could help improve it. Land purchased could be used to develop wetlands at the mouths of Waituna, Moffat and Carran Creeks to help filter the water running into the lagoon.

Roger also thinks it should not be forgotten that Waituna is a scientific reserve with Ramsar status and a national treasure, and therefore a national problem to be sorted. "So while the community has to be consulted and worked with, it is not a community decision, it is the responsibility of Environment Southland and the Department of Conservation and the public of New Zealand. It is an asset and it's owned by the country and it should be fixed," he says.



At the wee lake, Jim Watson with his son Fraser (6) and Paddy McNaughton constructing a maimai prior to duck shooting season.

WAITUNA'S CHANGING LAND USE BENEFITS FARMERS

Ray Matthews

Waituna farmer Ray Matthews has seen many changes in farming and fortunes, having lived in the Waituna district all his life. He grew up on a small dairy farm, then owned a sheep farm, which was later converted to deer, one of the first in the area to do so.

Seven years ago he converted to dairy in an equity partnership. It was a huge job that often employed 18 people on-site at any one time. Although Ray now lives at Riverton, he enjoys working on the farm during the week and says the change into dairying has been a success: "I'm supposed to be retired, but... Oh, it's just great for us, you know, coming back here and working. I'd go crazy doing nothing."

His parents farmed in the area all their lives, although it was a tough existence compared with now, as past diaries in the family tell. "They'd sell two calves and they'd get enough to buy some groceries and then they'd have enough to buy some petrol. I don't know how they did it actually. But then it was such a wee farm too, only being 100 acres."

Times were hard growing up on the farm as one of five children. "We didn't have any silver spoons in our mouth, we had to work – as soon as or before you left school you had to work."



Ray Matthews



A new house arrives on the Matthew's farm.

Ray became a shearer, helping pave the way to buying his farm, which he claims was the worst farm in the district because he couldn't afford anything better. "In hindsight we should have bought a better farm and went further into debt," he says.

Gorse had taken over and it took a lot of time and work developing the farm, such as putting in thousands of drainage tiles, to get production working well. "When I came here in 1966 the farm wouldn't run me full time. I'd still go out shearing two to three years to subsidise it. Now we have one couple and two people living off the farm. And we've just put another house on up the road."

Farming practices have also changed. In the early days on his farm he would do all the agriculture work himself, such as ploughing, sowing swedes and making hay and silage. He says sheep farmers back then simply could not afford to employ anyone else. Nowadays that work is all done by contractors.

The changes on his farm are also reflected in the wider community, which is no longer as tight-knit as when he grew up. He used to know everyone living along Waituna Creek, but he couldn't name them now as there has been rapid change in farm ownership. "Like 20 years ago I'd go down to the garage and I'd know every person that comes in. Now I can go down to the garage and not know one."



Waghorn Road under water – 1986 (approx).



Waituna Lagoon – 1983.



Blair Matthews at the opening of the lagoon – 1979.



Lagoon opening – 1979.

POWERFUL FORCES OF NATURE AT WORK AT WAITUNA

Allan Henderson

Contracting in the district, developing farms and being involved in the opening of Lake Waituna means Allan Henderson has a good idea of some of the powerful forces of nature at work in the area and methods used to wield control.

Allan bought his first farm in 1964 at the end of Waituna Creek. He said farming back then was very different, and at first they had no stock because they had to get the ground drained and grassed. “We had to build the road for starters because the end of Marshall Road stopped there,” says Allan pointing to a map. “We used to drive through the neighbour’s paddocks and walk in.”

It seems clear Allan has a love/hate relationship with Waituna Creek, having seen numerous floods over the years, making a mockery of attempts to tame it. “Waituna in those days was a shit of a creek, it is still a shit of a creek, make no mistake about it. There are records about what’s been done to the Waituna and it’s pretty big works. Straightening, and they’ve put in railway irons and chain mesh netting and steel wire, but the Waituna has just picked it up and chucked it out. It’s unbelievable what it’s done.”

He believes caution needs to be applied with ideas on fixing the creeks to assist problems in the lagoon because of the heavy floods that wash through them.



Ray Matthews drives the bulldozer to open Waituna Lagoon – 1979. (Photo Russell Matthews)

Allan was the chairman of the Lake Waituna Control Association for 10 years and has seen a few lake openings in his time. When water got to a certain level – 2.2 metres high – the digging began to open the lake to the sea, preventing farms being flooded. A northerly was a good day to open it when the sea was settled.

“You haven’t got much time to get stuck in to get that bank out of there to get the water away, and get enough steam on so that the lake beats the tide when it comes in. We’d start with the tide out – we were just doing it with a bulldozer in those days. It would start with a bit of a trickle and then overnight... it would just go, like you’ve got that whole volume of water – if you’ve a boat out there you are going to get turned around.”

“Not many people saw it because they were not there at the right time. You used to get a wee crowd at times and if it was getting near fishing time the fishermen would be out there. It was quite amazing.”

Allan says various schemes have been floated over the years to prevent flooding, such as digging a ditch through to Awarua, and digging a channel to the Maitua River. He says Lake Waituna has got to be looked after because it’s a “rare piece of countryside”.



Waituna Lagoon open to the sea – August 1980.
(Photo Jim Wilson)

RECOLLECTIONS OF FLOUNDERING AND LAGOON OPENINGS AT WAITUNA

Ewen Pirie

Waituna Lagoon has long been an attractive spot for its fishing and, in times past, good floundering, which was even the reason once used for manually opening the lagoon to the sea.

Farmer Ewen Pirie, who dates his family connections to the Waituna district back to 1860 – he is the fifth generation of Drakes, which Drake's Hill is named after – shared some of his recollections of openings and fishing at the lagoon and in creeks flowing into it.

Ewen says the earliest opening of Waituna Lagoon he can remember was in 1951. There were lots of people there and someone in a bulldozer pushing the sand to get the water going. About four years before that his father, some cousins and an uncle tried to open it down at Shirley's end. "They dug for two days and they had it all but ready to go and a big wave came in and washed the pea gravel back in again and they were that bugged, they said, 'stuff it' and went home. They wanted to open it because they thought they might get some flounders to come into the lagoon."

Floundering in the lagoon was a favourite pastime of Ewen's when he was young up until his twenties, and of other family members. "My father says that one of my great uncles was probably the last person prosecuted for dragging a net in the lagoon. Under the regulations you are only allowed to spear flounders, you are not allowed to drag a net. They got caught, they went to the lagoon with a horse and dray and they believed somebody saw the net in the dray as they went down the road and the rangers turned up. They got fined and the net was confiscated."

A tilly lantern was used to spot the flounder and they would carry it in front of them with a spear on the end of a shovel handle. Floundering was done in Walker's Bay, towards Awarua Bay. Ewen says, "We'd go down at night on the incoming tide and quietly walk around in the water and spear them. We'd normally do that in the summer time when it was a nice warm day. It would take us probably three or four hours by the time we walked to the lagoon and waited till dark. I can remember walking around there (by the breakout) as it was breaking daylight with as many flounders as I could carry in a sack on my back."

As a child Ewen was also keen on eeling in Waituna Creek. "My father had put a couple of old trees across the channel with a couple of planks across to run sheep backwards and forwards on winter. And I had a pulley system I could pull the eel pot in and out with. I got big fellas. There wouldn't be five percent of eels in the channel now and certainly nothing of any size as there was when I was a kid."

Although he only gets to the lagoon a few times a year now, he believes it is an important recreational area. Like many Waituna residents, Ewen is concerned about its declining health, which he believes originated from development around the edges of the lagoon done in the sixties. "I can remember Lands and Survey were developing all that stuff down by the lagoon. They used to fly the superphosphate on, they used to fly along with aeroplanes and go back and forth over the channels. And in that country grassgrub became a problem. DDT – they used to fly that on. I don't believe that you can say it's dairying – it's a combination of things. Dairying is probably the straw that broke the camel's back."

