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A TRACK WINDING BACK TO AN OLD-FASHIONED SHACK

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Setting out

Returning to Auckland at the end of 1954 with my art school colleague John Parry, after the almost obligatory grand tour of Europe's galleries, we met up again with another art student, Frank Davis, who, as a keen trapper, included pig and goat hunting among his enthusiasms. Frank, through yet another art school member, had met with the newly arrived Jack Golson who was planning an archaeological foray to remote Great Mercury Island where feral goats could possibly supplement the food supplies organised for the trip. Seizing the chance for a pleasant summer break Frank and I agreed to provision the archaeologists with fresh game before we took up our posts in 1955 as trainee art teachers. Alas, our goat hunting yielded only one kid, not much for all the effort. Our recourse to a more acceptable fishing strategy fared even worse and we were ignominiously reduced to buying a catch from the visiting fisherman Rolf Storey. We had noticed while stalking goats a flock of geese a couple of bays away from our campsite. As a final effort to meet our unwritten supply contract we set off in a dinghy with Jack Golson to shoot some birds where they stood, but alarmed by our approach they scattered to the sea where our efforts to run even one down and clout it with an oar faced the unknown fact that they could dive beneath the water. We could see that this was a futile enterprise without a shot being fired. Jack had his Panama hat that was the worse for wear but we, as if to loudly shout in the face of failure, held it at arms length and put a shot through it. Faced with redundancy as food suppliers and feeling slightly remorseful for the hat incident, and being marooned on the island, we were finally attached to shovels and trowels along with the rest of the excavation crew. This resulted in our interest in the strange business of archaeology and membership of the Archaeological Association.

The next summer season, at the end of 1955, saw six Training College art department colleagues muster for a stint of swamp excavation at Oruarangi,



Figure 14. Six art school graduates enlisted to excavate the Oruarangi site, December 1955, left to right, Wal Ambrose, Janet Beard, Warwick Bradshaw, John Parry, Frank Davis and Pamela Griffiths. Jack Golson is seated with a stray pet. Photo Wal Ambrose.

but this time the failure was in the archaeology for not finding even a small patch of ground that had not already been dug over by earlier museum-based excavators. Having to camp away from tapu ground in a bull paddock became a bit challenging when a bull decided to polish his horns by ripping through the tents. A dead cow floating in and out along the tidal creek added to the atmosphere. Local identity Pat Murdock wasn't impressed when he visited the dig at Oruarangi. He and other well-known artefact collectors proclaimed that there were better places to look. Not surprisingly by the second season at Mercury Island in 1956 some of the art school participants had priorities elsewhere, while the provisioning was under the watchful eye of Jean Geary, a home science graduate. The Wheeler way of having photographs processed on-site was undertaken by geographer Bob Brown, who managed this in a tent.

The methods of some of the local artefact collectors were fairly questionable, so that their need for a better archaeological approach was often presented to them. This also focussed attention on other practitioners in New Zealand who were slow to adopt the so-called "Woolley–Wheeler" way. It also appeared that a latent archaeological schism existed between the Auckland



Figure 15. The shack behind the Anthropology Department at 5 Symonds Street in the 1960s. Photo Wal Ambrose.

and South Island fraternities that became more apparent with the creation of Auckland University's undergraduate course in prehistory, coupled with Golson's organisation of the New Zealand Archaeological Association.

Settling in

Frank Davis and I began recording rock art sites in the central North Island in 1956 under the auspices of the National Historic Places Trust, with the enthusiastic support of its secretary John Pascoe who was also keen to see the Archaeological Association flourish. I was hired in 1957 as illustrator, photographer and general hand to the Anthropology Department, and took up residence in an old fashioned shack at the rear of number 5 Symonds Street. This was the year when the Sarah's Gully excavations began (the summer of 1956–57) while Motutapu excavations in March brought Les Groube, Colin Smart, and Andrew Pawley among others into the diggings where our osteologist identified dog bones as moa, or was it vice-versa. We could have benefited from the expertise of Ron Scarlett who later became an ever-present contributor to the Auckland archaeological scene. Ron Scarlett was no tyro when it came to finding archaeological sites in the company of artefact collectors, but a correction is in order for the canoe and hoanga episode that Ron reported from Sarah's Gully (Scarlett 1986). Ron had been scouting along the beach and reported



Figure 16. Ron Scarlett at Sarah's Gully, 1957. Photo Wal Ambrose.

what he thought was the remnant of an upturned canoe, others saw it as the outer portion of a decayed log. He was asked to excavate 'the canoe' in the correct archaeological manner while sceptics inserted beneath it a naturally fashioned stone, filed to appear as a hoanga. In due course both were shown to be false but Ron nevertheless posed for a photograph that leaves little doubt that he at least was convinced of their authenticity at the time. The episode of the moa bone fishhook fashioned from a biscuit has been dealt with by others. Ron was so good natured about these spoofs that he almost seemed to invite them upon himself.

The Association conference in Dunedin in 1957 was very memorable for the antics of those ensconced in the Captain Cook Hotel, where the publican exercised a liberal interpretation of licensing hours. I recall reclining in a bath, sans water, as the constabulary paid an unexpected visit, while other delegates had other ploys to avoid their interrogation. In early 1958 Frank, my wife Janet and I recorded rock art galleries within the site of the Benmore Dam, with Roger Duff and Michael Trotter, where we also sampled Bill Hamilton's amazing prototype jet boats zipping across the shallow Waitaki river gravels. Tony Fomison made a short visit as site recording officer on a later Benmore recording exercise. The 'chick' that graces the cover of the New Zealand Journal of Archaeology (incidentally, upside-down) was recorded during these surveys. The sequel to the recording meant that never again would I want to take part in a 'rescue' of rock art that required it to be removed by explosives, as it was at Benmore by the contract engineers.

After returning from recording rock art in the Benmore area in January 1958 we joined the melancholy educational event in Christchurch where, during the excavation of Moa Bone Point Cave, as Susan Bulmer's song says, there were 'moa bones and iron bolts three feet in natural sand' (Groube 1993). I remember taking out 3-ply from some depth after being asked to carefully excavate in arbitrary spits. The dung from a time when the shelter was used to house circus elephants must have had some magical properties.

The Association's appointment of regional site record file keepers saw Frank Davis take on these duties for the district around Whakatane, where he was the high school art teacher. As relatively youthful, big-headed and irreverent conscripts to the archaeological cause Frank and I devised a plan to caution the fossickers and others who failed to see the unalloyed virtue of stratigraphic excavation. A plot was hatched to present a midden excavation report to the 1959 Archaeological Association Conference in Rotorua; the line drawings, cross sections and photographic slides were all concocted with the photography and drafting facilities in the shack at No 5 Symonds Street. The visuals showed clear structure in the 'midden' but we described an excavation by unit levels while ignoring any internal complications so typical of any shell midden. The inconsistency in the resulting artefact sequence was explained away as a need to reconsider the given outline of New Zealand prehistory. The horrible effect of this exercise was that a notable South Island archaeologist thought we had done a reasonable job on the excavation and expressed his guarded compliments for the work. In the final summing up we had to divulge the fake and left feeling extremely embarrassed by the positive response of some in the audience. In the spirit of cooperative archaeology fostered by the Archaeological Association both the Moa Bone Point Cave and the Rotorua experiences were designed as educational events, and indeed they were.

Checking out

The old fashioned shack at the back of No 5 Symonds Street shared a fence with the backyard of a 'guest house' at No 7. Wanton visitors carousing in their yard would occasionally lob an empty onto the roof of the shack, but apart from the din no damage was caused. It was also where I, as treasurer to the early Association, faced the difficulties of the end of financial year reconciliation that was finally balanced by a subvention from Jack Golson, who, after all, controlled what little finances there were. But the shack had its revenge when the department took over the adjoining No 7, cleaned it out of its loose linoleum, and installed new laboratories. Hardly had we been relocated into the new quarters before I headed off for a long track to Canberra in 1963. Frank Davis moved to Palmerston North to teach art teachers and sadly died a young man some years ago. It was he, however, who introduced me to a lifetime of archaeology, a fact I am very glad to acknowledge in the significant context of the 50th anniversary of the New Zealand Archaeological Association.

References

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