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CAKE AND TURF

Tess Canavan
Hawera

Through anthropology students visiting Hawera I heard about the Auckland University Archaeological Society, and asked to join. The first and most memorable venture was a dig at Sarah's Gully, quite a hike from Whitianga. I was ignorant of camping though I had some heavy, but impressive, gear. The camp organisers had a practical side: each new arrival was expected to bring in fresh bread and a fruit cake. Someone in the camp was always leaving or arriving, so I was lucky to have an escort. It was not a tramp for the faint hearted or heavily laden.

The setting was lovely. Cows lolled on the beach below the site and one could swim among them. It was a marvellous way to get clean.

The camp was highly efficient. Excavating was only part of the day's work. On kitchen duty one chopped, peeled, cooked and washed up for up to twenty people. No one complained about the meals. The cakes were a real treat.

The anthropology students (I felt like an equal when I use the diminutive anthro) were helpful and considerate to a very mixed group of non-students. In the early sixties folk songs were very popular, and there was often sentimental singing around the campfire. "This land is your land, This land is my land, From way up Northland, To Stewart Island" was quite a favourite. And it was grand to discuss role models like Pitt Rivers and Sir Mortimer Wheeler. When, years later, I attended a lecture in Ealing, London, given by Sir Mortimer and heard him imitate the accent of an audience member asking a question I regretted my reverence.

Apart from my terror of missing anything that could be called an artefact, or casually disregarding a bone or shell from a midden, my lasting memory is the smell of greasy soil. Some very haphazard cooking of fish, bird and rat had been supervised by dogs whose appreciation of the feast was evident in their ample droppings.

Digging made a great deal of sense when I visited the Mt. Wellington pa site and was introduced to the grid and the baulk. But it was not until helping at an Urenui site in North Taranaki that I learned about layers of soil. The walls of

the excavation, straight and precise as a fine building, could be cleaned with the gentle application of a blow torch, the better to expose as many as nine layers for photography.

Turfing too is a fine art. To replace each turf in its exact order is to take pride in a spade as well as a trowel. Digging with members of the Auckland group trained to meticulous research made one realise that fossicking, while pleasurable, and often profitable, is destructive. But it was not as a fossicker that Melva Riley, sitting on the sand at Ohawe Beach near Hawera discovered a moa bone abandoned among its stones and ashes, and skilfully uncovered it. Further along the beach on a site used as a metal quarry some lucky fellow kicked up a couple of beautiful adzes. He gave them up.

A storm which cleared a stretch of Kaipokonui Beach of a protective layer of sand could have turned this site into a fossicker's paradise. Luckily it remained a well kept secret while Alastair Buist and his team picked over the loot, which included several moa bone needles.

We were able to learn at this time so much from Association members like Jack Golson, Les Groube, Ham Parker and Wilf Shawcross. They would have known exactly what to do if they fell into a pit of moa eggs.