



NEW ZEALAND
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NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER



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PURAKU, GUNFIGHTERS' PA

B. Mitcalfe.

Until eight years ago, the city of Rotorua had on its back doorstep, Puraku pa, described by James Cowan as the best example of Maori skill in entrenchment, but, despite appeals from those concerned, the pa was stripped of its protective covering of fern, and within the last five years, grassed and trampled by stock until it has lost its recognizable outline, preserved so clearly until so recently. Although the farmer on whose property Puraku stands notified the Historic Places Trust Board that he was about to clear the site and asked for assistance to fence and preserve it, and although members of the Rotorua branch of the N.Z. Archaeological Association, including Mr D. M. Stafford, historian of the Arawa people, asked for Internal Affairs Department aid to maintain this site, nothing was done. Now, what would have been an authentic historical monument and an undeniable tourist attraction (only eight miles by tar-sealed road from Rotorua) is little more than a series of dips and hummocks bearing scant resemblance to the fortification described by James Cowan in "N.Z. Wars and the Pioneering Period", Vol. 2, pp. 163-173, 1956:

"When the Government forces inspected this captured pa they found it a marvel of Maori military engineering ingenuity, and even today its trenches with traverses and flanking bastions remain almost intact, a monument which should not be obliterated. The double palisading was destroyed by the Arawa, but they fortunately did not take the trouble to fill in the entrenchments. There were two strong palisades, the pekerangi on the outside of the trench and the kiri-tangata ("the warrior's skin") immediately inside. These stockades had been constructed of totara timber hauled from the near-by forest by the sledge-track which wound up past the pa. The trench was about three feet wide with a depth of five feet. The interior of the work measured 80 paces in length by 45 paces at the widest part, and this space was largely occupied by low huts thatched with kaponga fern-tree fronds, the sides and eaves well protected by being earthed up for several feet. The earth floors of these huts were dug in a foot or two below the level of the marae outside, a feature which gave their occupants additional safety. The trench, with its numerous traverses and covered ways, was essentially the same as our soldiers' trenches in France and Flanders in the Great War, but in one detail there was a difference. The pakeha engineer throws out the earth from the trench in front of his ditch in order to form a low parapet; the Maori cast the earth on the inner side, his rear, lest the bullets of the enemy, striking the loose, soft

soil, should throw dirt in his eyes, confuse his aim, and perhaps temporarily blind him. The dug-out soil also formed a parapet, or parapet, on the outer side of the main line of palisading, close against the back of which the bullet-proof whares were built. On the marae, the open space or parade-ground, stood the kiu, around which the Hauhaus marched chanting their Pai-marira service. There was a low, roughly built railing, a Hauhaus altar-rail, around the foot of the mast; within this tapu space stood the tokunga, the priest of the war-party, who slowly revolved about the pole, leading the chantings."

The pa had been constructed on the site of older fortifications on a gentle ridge commanding the Rotorua-Waikato track. The Hauhaus were joined by dissident Ngati-Rangiwehiwhi tribesmen from the Arawa confederation and may have numbered 200 men in all. A force of 3-4 militia under Major McDonnell and friendly Maoris under Gilbert Mair attacked the pa. Realising they were almost surrounded and apparently low on ammunition, the Hauhaus abandoned the site, losing eleven killed and many wounded in the pursuit through the bush beyond.

That was in March, 1867. For almost a hundred years the site of the battle was to remain undisturbed. Farmers in the Ngongotaha district describe how one could pick up clay pipes, rusting Tower musket barrels and flintlock pieces in the vicinity only a few years ago.

When he cleared the land, the owner of Puraku, Mr D. E. McLeay, did something rare for a farmer. He deliberately left the pa site untouched, neither discing nor harrowing it. A 'burn-off' and aerial top-dressing and over-sowing, brought away a good growth of grass in the brown, volcanic loam. Now, despite his good intentions, despite notification to all authorities concerned and despite its ideal location and state of preservation, another historical monument is almost obliterated. It could possibly be reconstructed, but it would never be the same.

How long can we afford to ignore our past or allow a government to disregard our heritage? A site such as Puraku has value not only for tourists, but for all New Zealanders. Soon it will be just another stretch of farmland, oddly green in certain places and hummocked in others, but with no other sign of its - or our - history.