The Waitohu Stream, providing abundantly – an interview with Betty Raureti

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Retitia Betty Raureti nee Hakaraia was born in Otaki in 1931. Her mother, Bonnie Oriwia Hakaraia, like many people of her generation, lived in Otaki for all of her life. In those days people belonged to a community and they frequently stayed in the community for the whole of their lives. Marriage was a reason for moving away but in the 19th and early 20th century, this might involve moving to a neighbouring community so contact remained frequent and responsibility to the wider family continued. We look back now and think of those communities as being idyllic as we recognise the strength which came with having extended families responsible for children and the elderly.

In 2004, I interviewed Betty for an oral history project which was focussed on a local river, the Waitohu Stream. It runs from the hills to the east of Otaki and meanders across the northern reaches of the town to the Tasman Sea on the west coast of New Zealand. It has the potential to rush down from the hills during heavy rain and to flood the farmland on either side in places, to wipe out small bridges and eat at the foundations of other bridges across its reach. State Highway I from Wellington to Auckland crosses over the Waitohu Stream just north of Otaki. Those who travel that road have seen the stream in flood in summer, autumn, winter and spring. It can be unpredictable and like all rivers has a life force which determines its character and its personality.

Betty Raureti talks about this river as one who knows it well. She was brought up by her grandmother on the south side of the river on the Mangapouri Stream, a tributary of the Waitohu. She went to school a stone's throw away from home and wandered the environs as a child and teenager before going to Boarding School and Teacher's College in the late 1940s. She was a pre-World War II child, brought up during the depression. Her story is one of a close and secure childhood in a close-knit Māori community with many cousins and aunts and uncles. Despite being a child in the Depression years, she recalls it as a time when there was always heaps of food. Their families lived beside the stream which provided an abundance and variety of food.

She describes a community which knew its river well, knew the places to find eels, knew when and where to fish for flounder. The river provided a place for recreation for the children who swam and jumped from trees into the water hole yet it was also a safe place with the older children caring for the young. Betty records her favourite methods for cooking and preparing whitebait, eels, crayfish and fermented corn – a delicacy amongst Māori people.

I was brought up at Tainui by my kui (grandmother) so any time there was swimming to do it was in the Waitohu Stream. I suppose that would be my earliest memory of actually interacting with the stream because the Mangapouri is in front of Kui's house

and as little kids we did a lot of walking around and eeling in that stream. There was sort of an unwritten law that you didn't go swimming until you got bigger. The swimming hole was by the bridge at the golf links on Convent Road. The boys used to climb the hill at the end of the creek, climb the big tree and jump off into the pool. I used to think they were absolutely amazing as all the boys did that. I don't remember any girl getting up there and jumping off.

It must have been deeper in those days than it is now, although the boys had a way of jumping into shallow places so they didn't hit the bottom or they didn't get hurt. When we were there, there were kids galore. No togs, nothing, you just got in, in those days. I don't think the finances stretched to buy togs. No-one worried, but that's how I interacted with that pool. When it was your turn to go there you knew you were starting to grow up because only the big kids were allowed to go down there. The bigger kids, teenagers were there. There were 18 Enoka kids so there were heaps of them over at the pool at any one time. Although the creek went right past their house, they would all swim in that pool. The boys would take off along the creek to get koura (crayfish) or eel or fish or get whatever was in the water. They would take spears and get something.

We were a very large whānau that lived in close proximity to one another. I can recall on a number of occasions when of an evening one would hear a yodel type call of someone's name that would echo across the papakainga (community) and the like reply – it was someone reminding an offspring that it was time to get along home.

Excursions within the neighbourhood were always undertaken in numbers, in groups by those who were free at the time while others had chores such as looking after younger ones, so they had to stay closer to home.

Between our homes and the Tasman Sea (about a mile away) live our aunty, Heipiripiri (the youngest sister of our grandfather) and her pākehā husband and their four children who were much older than us. Only two of her children still lived at home as they attended Horowhenua College. These two boys were great mates to the older cousins on the marae in that many of the excursions would be meetings at Aunty Hei's house, or going floundering at the mouth of the stream, going to gather pipi (shellfish) or tohemanga (shellfish), checking for eels during the 'heke tuna' time or dragging Uncle Harry's rowboat along the Waitohu Stream and out to sea to drag the net for fish.

Many a day was spent by us on the river outside Aunty Hei's house. They had a raft-like boat that the boys used to sail down the river, anchor, walk along the road to the beach store, buy groceries, and return to the raft with the groceries safe and dry.

Aunty Hei and Uncle Harry did a lot of fishing. They would punt out to the mouth of the river and take their lines and nets out. He was a good fisherman and sold a bit, made money out of it. There was plenty of fish.

Back at the swimming hole there were black mussels in the sand and the creek. My kui used to like them so we'd get some and take them over to her and she'd boil or steam them. I tried them and they were awful. I don't know how she could have eaten

them. I've been told there is a way to cook them and they didn't taste bitter like when I cooked them but I didn't try them again – I leave them in the sand now.

Back at the mouth there were flounders galore. Our lot went up to the river mouth in the evenings with spears and got flounders. At the beach they used nets. We also got koura (crayfish) the little ones. You'd fill a peach tin, bring it back, add water and sit it in the fire to just turn them red and that was a good meal. I thought they were good because you ate everything when you got the little ones. Just put them into your mouth and chewed them.

When we were kids, we went to the river at 10 o'clock in the morning and might come home at 8 o'clock at night. You didn't take any food with you. It was up to you to find food there and eat it and that's what we used to do. It was no difficulty at all. You'd get an eel, chop that up or just throw it on the fire as it was, then nibble at that. I don't think I'd eat them now like that, but they certainly were great when you were hungry.

The girls caught the eels by bobbing. You thread worms through flax and you tie it into a loop and then tie the flax on to a stick and just hang it in the water. The eel snaps at it and can't let go so you flick it out and whack it. The boys would walk through the weed with spears and flick them – cut it across its back. They would head to the places where there were muddy banks on the side. They knew exactly where to go. They had spots where they knew they would find exactly what they wanted.

I used to have a lovely time with my kui who used to just sit by the creek and bob for eels. It was really quiet and peaceful. She'd get four eels and that would be enough to take home.

In the whitebait season they would go out in the morning and bring the whitebait back for breakfast. They had so much whitebait my kui would feed some to our chooks. It would be in buckets. Outside the houses they had tin that covered the firewood. They would spread the whitebait over the tin covers to dry out. As kids coming backwards and forwards from school you would grab a handful and put it in your pocket and you would have chewing gum for the rest of the day. Chewed dried whitebait. Whitebait and pipi (shellfish) were dried. Most of the time the oldies ate whitebait in milk. You put it in with milk and an egg and cooked it like that. It goes white and light – a bit like scrambled eggs with whitebait. They would eat the whitebait and then drink the juice – delicious. I still like it like that. There was heaps of food.

We grew up just after the depression. A lot of people died at that time and we heard there was no food around and yet all the time we were growing up there was heaps of food: fish, shellfish, whitebait, eels, mussels. A nice eel was 2 and a half to 3 centimetres across – nice because you could do heaps with it – chop it up, fry it, boil it with onions, bake it in the oven so it would go crispy and brown. I like it now when its barbecued – that reminds me of the way Kui used to cook it. When there were crowds she would boil it and there would be heaps in the pot with the water and onions. I loved it baked and fried.

When someone went out and got heaps, well they would bring it back for everybody to share. They would drop it off at different places and the elders would always get

some. With whitebait fritters: egg whitebait and very little flour – just to bind it, fried in butter so you get the full benefit of the whitebait.

There were Chinese gardeners around here so it got to the stage where there was no point in growing vegetables. You just went to the Chinese gardens and got tomatoes, carrots or a cabbage when you wanted. We didn't take much, only what you needed. There was a connection with the neighbours.

Further up the river there were masses of lilies that grew along the creek. Lilies were grown and sent to the market to sell. We would have a weekend and pick lilies, put them in a box and send them off to market. If we needed money we would go and do that.

In those days no-one stopped us from going off for the day and no-one worried about us while we were out. There was always this knowledge that if you were one of the older ones you had to make sure the younger ones were alright.

We stored kanga wai in the stream – fermented corn. My grandmother grew the corn, put it into sugarbags and she'd put wire netting around the bags. She would put several in the creek and they would stay there until she was ready to take them out. If she didn't cover the bags properly the eels would eat the corn. That was an important source of food in those days. She would take out a bag, scrape the corn off the cob and mash it up and it would be turned into cakes, bread and porridge. She would take out what she needed and put the rest back in the creek. The whole cob goes into the sacks for weeks. I like kanga wai exactly like porridge with a bit of water in it and it thickens like porridge. Put sugar and cream and butter on it.

What are the changes? Well they raffle or sell whitebait now. It's like gold. There are not nearly the volumes any more. It's the same with fish – we used to get heaps of it – but now you can sell it. The river is more like a creek. It should be looked after. They spend a lot of money changing the mouth of the stream – it should go where it wants as it's done that for years and years. It's lovely at the mouth of the Waitohu Stream – it's a good beach and good sand.

Betty has had a career as a teacher and school principal. She has been a key instigator of a kura-a-iwi school in Ōtaki, New Zealand, where children learn in the Māori language. In her seventies she remains active in education having been an educational leader for most of her adult life. She is a mother of five children and thirteen grandchildren. Betty has been a keen sportswoman, played tennis, been a national netball umpire and player, a keen supporter of field hockey, rugby football and rugby league. She is a community leader in Ōtaki and continues to take an active role in Māori education initiatives in Ōtaki. The oral history interview was recorded on 28th October 2004 in Otaki. The tape recordings, transcriptions and abstracts are deposited in the Oral History Centre Archives of the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington New Zealand and at the Te Wānanga-o-Raukawa Library, Ōtaki, New Zealand.

These two interviews with John Huff and Betty Raureti are two of a collection of nine recorded in 200 focussing on the Waitohu Stream. The interviews provide histories of the different stretches of the river from the hills to the sea. All are deposited in the

Oral History archives at the National Library, Wellington and in the Te Wānanga-o-Raukawa library.