

HAPPY BIRTHDAY!

Mrs Ria Moheko Taiaroa looks back on 80 years

The eightieth birthday party for Mrs Ria Wineera on 10 October drew 400 people to Ngati Toa's marae at Takapuwahia in Porirua. All of her eleven surviving children came — two of them from overseas — and Minister of Maori Affairs Ben Couch was also there.

Paul Bensemann (married to one of Mrs Wineera's grand-nieces) visited the popular lady of the pa before the party started and gathered these snippets of her unusual life story.

"If I'd known you were coming I would have gone to housey," she said . . . then laughing gave me a kiss at the door.

With aroha and teasing, she keeps her secrets. Everyone at the pa knows "Aunty Leah", but nobody knows Ria Moheko Taiaroa.

"Stop talking — you'll make me go deaf," she interrupted when I started asking questions.

In the last twenty years a city has grown up around her, but I walked off the street into the kitchen/dining room of a friendly old farmhouse. "I'll make you a cup of tea to stop you nagging."

While waiting for the kettle she finally talked about her husband, who died in 1952, and their marriage. "I never met him beforehand — I was worried in a way but I soon got over it." She smiled. "I don't want to tell you any more — there were no other pastimes in those days."

She spoke as if her life was all easy.

"I think I was born at Otakou — at the Kaik* — anyway I grew up there 'til I was six, when my parents died. Then I went to my grandparents at Taumutu, besides Lake Ellesmere. We

had eels by the gallon, pukeko, wild duck, swan, trout — never had to buy anything. We used an old water-trough to preserve meat — filled it with salt and threw the carcass in."

Just then there was a knock; the butcher's boy brought in a boxful of meat.

"Gee I'll starve, this is a tame bill," said Aunty Leah, looking at the weekly docket. "Here's the cheque — I hope it bounces."

When the boy had left we went into a dimly lit corridor where Aunty Leah held a small torch to put light on some very old faces. Walking to the woodstove in her slippers and old overcoat, she played down her family's importance, but admitted what I knew already.

Grandfather Hori Kerei Taiaroa was a pioneer Maori member of Parliament and was probably the last man trained in the traditional Kai Tahu wananga. He built a two-storied mansion at Taumutu with exotic gardens any English lord would have envied. The house is now 100 years old and the home of N.Z. Maori Council member Riki Te Mairaki Ellison-Taiaroa — Aunty Leah's nephew.

"I loved it there. We had plenty of visitors — Ngata, Dr Buck, Carroll, Dr Pomare — they were always too cunning, locked themselves away in the study."

Aunty Leah's grandmother had a fulltime maid and servant, and she spoke very little English.

"If a man came in, she'd say to us 'she come'. Gee we laughed." But the special Kai Tahu dialect Leah grew up with was knocked out in only three years at Te Waipounamu College. "The only Maori allowed was in the hymns."

* Southern South Island word for "Kainga".



Left (left to right) Hori Kerei Taiaroa, MP, Leah's grandfather; her sister Tini (Riki Ellison-Taiaroa's mother); Leah, aged about seven; and Tini Taiaroa, Leah's grandmother. H.K. Taiaroa wears a tikumu cape made from leaves of the South Island mountain daisy.

Right Aunty Leah today with her family. Back row, from left: Te Rakaiheria, Tuwhareiti, Te Rauparaha, Tini Kerei, Ngahina. In front are Ethel and Takamaiterangi — and Spotty, of course.