

History the way it happened

Pictures by Tim Koller

by Charlton Clark

Ngati Maiapoto elder Tahana Wahanui likes to tell the story of the tourist coach driver who explains to his passengers how the King Country got its name.

The story goes that the driver stops his coach at the Puniu River bridge between Te Awamutu and Otorohanga and tells his listeners they are about to cross into the King Country.

And he says the King Country all used to belong to a very wealthy man known as The King, which was how it got its name.

But Mr Wahanui knows better — and he wishes everyone else did too.

So he has embarked on a one-man campaign to acquaint the public in general and schoolchildren in particular with a few pertinent facts about Maori history.

With the result that hundreds of children and main-street shoppers in King Country and Waikato towns have become used to the sight of Mr Wahanui and his display boards in playgrounds and shopping centres.

He says he is appalled by the number of people who do not know how the King Country got its name. So part of his education programme is a one-man re-enactment of the incident at a meeting at

Tuhikaramea in 1858 from which the name arose.

For this he uses a top hat and a tomahawk as well as his display boards covered in genealogies, pictures, newspaper and magazine cuttings and handwritten items.

The meeting, on the hilltop where the Mormon temple now stands at Temple View, involved Maori King Tawhiao, Governor Robert Fitzroy, George Grey (a later governor) and Colonel Thomas Gore-Brown.

According to Mr Wahanui, Governor Fitzroy caught the Maori warrior king off-guard by telling him he wanted to split the North Island in half — the western half for Tawhiao's people, and eastern half for the pakeha.

So Tawhiao asked for the governor's top hat, which he placed on the ground. He then took a tomahawk and went to chop the hat in two, at which Governor Fitzroy protested.

So Tawhiao put the tomahawk away again, and asked the governor: "Is it right that you should cut my land in half, like I could cut your hat in half?"

He then placed the hat on a large map of the North Island spread out on the ground, and drew a line around its rim, saying he and his chiefs would rule the land inside the line, and the pakeha could rule the rest.

It was a gentleman's agreement, said Mr Wahanui, and was the reason why the Waikato Wars of the 1860s were not carried south of the Puniu River.

And it was that incident which gave rise to the name, the King Country, which the Maori came to know as Te Rohe Potae — the hat boundary.

After their defeat in the Waikato War, Tawhiao and his people retreated into the King Country, where the pakeha largely left them alone until Tawhiao came out in 1881 to officially make peace at Pirongia.

And that's the story Mr Wahanui tells schoolchildren in playgrounds at lunch-time, and passers-by in town, along with how the King Country was opened up late last century to the Main Trunk railway, and how the Maori came to New Zealand.

He started his project in 1976, and has found that more and more pakeha people are becoming interested in Maori history and culture as time goes by.

But he feels disappointed that many Maori high school pupils expect to end up on the dole when they leave school, while their pakeha colleagues tend to recoil with horror at the prospect.

So Mr Wahanui says he tries to spend as much time as he can in high schools encouraging Maori pupils to aim higher and expect more of themselves.

He says he tells them that even though the colour of their skins may be different, their brains are just as good as the pakeha's, so they can achieve just as much if they set their minds to it.

Mr Wahanui should know what he's talking about. He is descended from a distinguished Ngati Maniapoto family, one of whom was the paramount chief Wahanui, who negotiated with the Government for the railway route through the King Country.

His grandfather was Te Hemara Rerehau Paraone Wahanui, who went to Europe in 1859 with the Austrian geologist and explorer Ferdinand von Hochstetter and the German explorer Julius von Haast.

His journey was offered as a token of the explorers' gratitude to the Maori King movement for allowing them access to the King Country to undertake research.

Te Hemara and his companion Wiremu Toetoe Tumohe, both heavily tattooed, reportedly created a minor sensation in Austria, where they were presented to the Emperor, who was apparently delighted to receive them.

While in Europe the pair were taught the printing trade, and when they returned to New Zealand, they founded the Maori King movement newspaper Te Hokioi — named after a legendary



Tahana Wahanui ... setting the record straight.