

# Waitaha keeps culture alive down south

**Ever heard of the Nga Pakihi Whakatekateka o Waitaha Maori Cultural Council?**

**If you haven't, it's not so surprising, because back in 1968, the name — which refers to the great stretch of swamp-grass countryside of Canterbury — underwent a change, with the approval of the elders, and became simply, Waitaha (Canterbury).**

And if that still doesn't ring a bell, at least you are certain to have seen something of the results of the Council's work.

Remember February 26th and 27th, 1977 — the Silver Jubilee visit of Her Majesty and H.R.H. the Duke of Edinburgh to New Zealand — and the Royal Polynesian Festival?

The winning team was a composite team, organised and trained by Waitaha tutors, Te Kotahitanga-o-Waitaha.

Under the name of Te Wai Pounamu (South Island, Place of Greenstone), Waitaha-organised groups also made up the South Island representatives among performers at Gisborne, during the Queen's visit in 1970.

Later came the opening of Queen Elizabeth II Park; and in 1974, a party trained by Waitaha people performed for the opening of the Commonwealth Games.

## Train people

"A tremendous undertaking", according to the present Secretary of the W.M.C.C., Mrs Ethel Walters, "with so many people to arrange transport for!"

"Council tutors went from Christchurch to the various areas of the South Island to train the groups in action songs and poi dances — especially composed for the occasion. Later, all the groups came to Christchurch two or three times for rehearsal."

The W.M.C.C. also arranged for a group — under Johnno Crofts, who was on the first council in 1968 — to remain on standby all the time at Harewood Airport, welcoming arrivals for the Games.

The following year saw the opening of the New Zealand Games — and again, it was a Waitaha team performing, after only one month's notice.

"The Maori is always ready!" claims Mrs Walters, "and they learn quickly. Songs and dances are not usually known beforehand — each group composes its own, for the occasion".

## Own competitions

Performances have been given for the Shah and Shahbanou of Iran — and for other civic events, in Christchurch. In July, the W.M.C.C. held its own annual cultural competitions; and more re-

cently, organised the South Island annual competitions, held this year in Christchurch Town Hall, in October.

Maoritanga is the very fabric of life and history for our Maori people; Ethel Walters recalls an unusual example of how far they are prepared to go to preserve it, and make it known to others — and enjoy themselves, into the bargain.

"In the early days, 1965/66, under Kia Riwai (who formed the first cultural competition groups), we had church groups with too few men. They used to go prison-visiting often, so they got some Maori prisoners to help out. Those boys were keen enough to come and perform with the groups on stage — with wardens waiting in the wings — and then go back to prison!"

The late Miss Kia Riwai spent a lot of time with seasonal workers in the northern South Island — fruit and hop-pickers in Nelson and Motueka. She decided it would be a good idea if they formed their own cultural clubs in their different areas, and all work in together.

## Take over

So she revived the competitions under the auspices of the Maori Affairs Department. Later on, after her death in 1967, the then District Officer of the Maori Affairs Department, Mr J. Lewin, called together representatives of Maori clubs in Canterbury to take over the competitions themselves, and to continue this "vital aspect of Maoritanga".

The following year, the first Maori Cultural Committee was formed, with Mr J. Waretini as its Chairman; Johnno Crofts, Vice-Chairman; Terry Ryan, Secretary and including Mr Hori Brennan as Advisor and Mrs Walters from the W.E.A. Maori Club, on its Committee.

Application was made to the elders for the shortening of the original name, the Waitaha Maori Cultural Competitions Council went into action, and has been hard at work ever since!

The aims of all Maori clubs tell the story of cultural and social consciousness. Typical, are the comments at the recent South Island Competitions, in introducing the juniors of Te Kotahitanga, with the Club's aim "to achieve awareness of Maoritanga and promote social harmony". Another group, Kereru, wants to "help other clubs in all activities".

## All friends

Accordingly, it wasn't surprising to get the response from children backstage that "we don't really care who wins!" It seems that "competition can be fierce during a performance, and then everyone is friends again!"

Although the Council's main aim has been to continue the promotion and organisation of the annual competitions, gradually it has also become the parent body for all Maori performances in Canterbury, and sometimes for the



A composite group, Te Rongopai me Te Arohanui with Ethel Walters.