

“Winning Posts”

by Raymond S Ryan

an Essay for

The Wilderness Revisited.

The J T Diamond

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Abstract

One of my childhood holiday experiences was helping my Great Uncle, Horace Mobbs, in his endeavours at his Anawhata Farm. In 1942, the newly established Centennial Park Board acquired some 300 acres of the farm. Horace contracted to build the new boundary fence. The terrain was steep, the bush was dense, and the war was in progress. In spite of these conditions, Horace's tenacity and commitment meant he took the challenges in his stride.

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August 2004

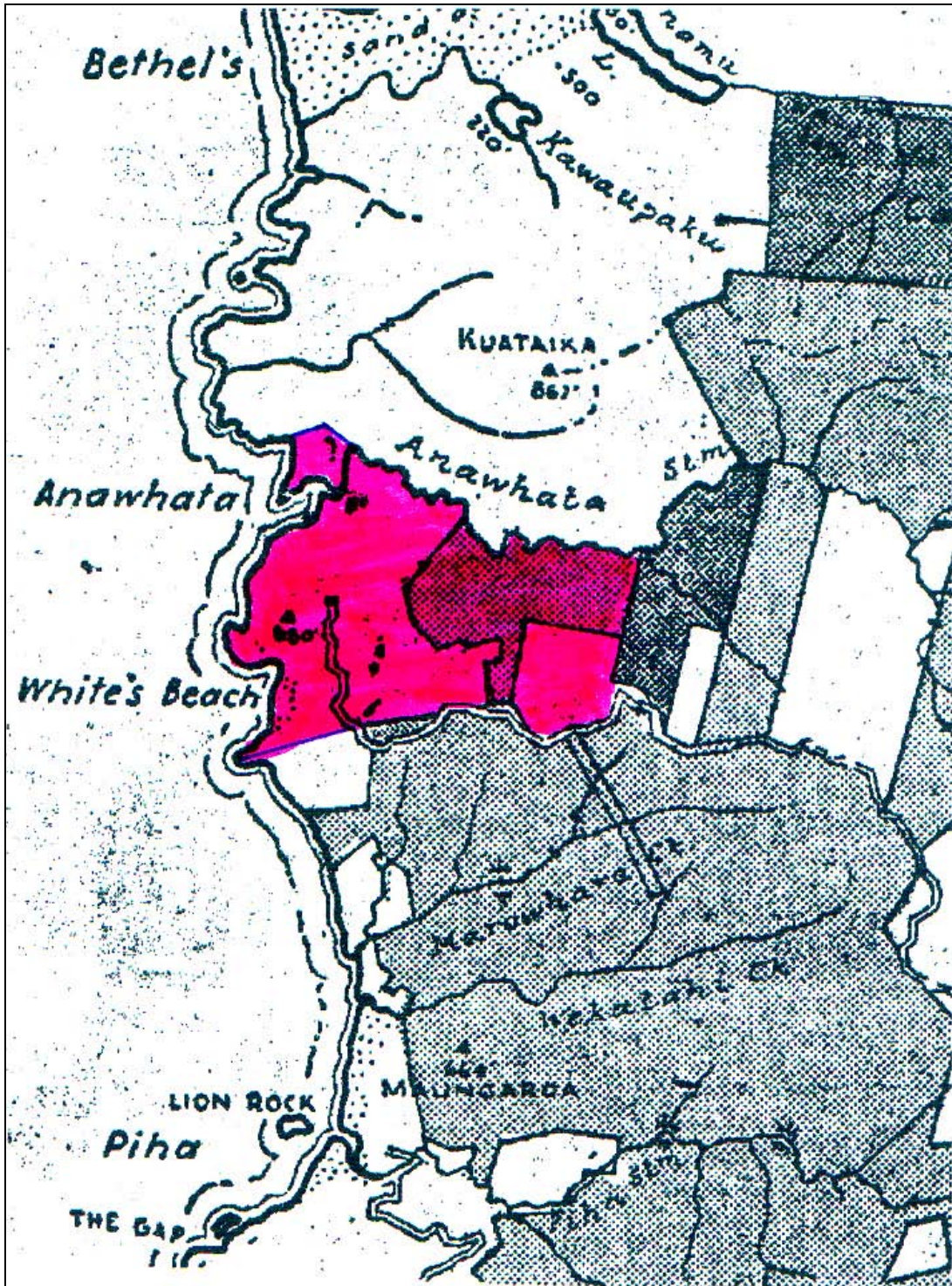
Winning Posts.

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In 1922 my Great Uncle, Horace Mobbs bought the Anawhata Farm from a Mr Boucher. The 1000 acre property had a coastal boundary that stretched from Te Waha Point (North end of Piha), up the coast to include Whites Beach, Paikea Bay, Anawhata Beach, Parere Bay and on up to the ridge separating Cannibal Creek and Anawhata. The boundary then followed the left bank of the Anawhata Stream up stream for a distance of approximately 2¹/₂ kilometres. The boundary then came in a straight line up the steep sided valley toward the Anawhata Road to emerge from the bush some 3 kilometres back from the Coast.

Although intending to farm the property, Horace Mobbs was drawn to the abundance of large kauri logs that littered the Anawhata Beach. These logs had arrived on the beach as a consequence of early logging operations in the valley. They had bypassed the lower retention dam as it over topped. A series of dams had been constructed in the stream to flush the logs down to a point about 1 kilometre upstream of the beach. There the logs were hauled up the valley side on a tramline and onto the mill at Piha via a railway. The over-topping and logjams in the gorges were some of the risks associated with the early logging operations around the 1910 to 1914 times. The logs on the beach were not recoverable at that time by those doing the extraction.

Diagram of the Anawhata Farm boundaries.



Auckland Star, 20 September 1944

Fig 1.

Legend: Red Area = Original 1000 acre Anawhata Farm boundaries.
Dotted area within = the 300 acres purchased by the Centennial Memorial Park Board somewhere between 1942 and 1944

Horace set about employing pitsawyers to mill the logs into manageable fitches with the intention of selling the timber in the City. Difficulties in extracting the timber from the beach, and transporting them to the city meant the enterprise was far from profitable.

By this stage, the depression of the thirties was on them. It was hard to make enough money to live. Horace had tried to sell the farm but although there were a few takers, their intention did not meet Horace's expectations. Horace declared that if he could not sell the farm as a going concern, he'd sell it "a shovel-full at a time"¹. Ultimately this is what happened.

In 1941, the Centennial Memorial Park Board was established under an Act of Parliament. Prior to this date reserves had been created in the Waitakere ranges for both recreation and water supply purposes. At the time of its establishment, nearly 4300 acres came under its control. An objective was to expand the Park to 10,000 acres. Its "policy (would) be to maintain and restore as far as possible the original native condition of the Park, with only such works as are necessary to make its points of interest accessible to visitors."²

Some 300 acres in the Anawhata Valley of Horace's 1000acre farm were extremely steep terrain and heavily bush clad. This land stretched from the southern bank of the Anawhata Stream to the ridges to the south (figure 1). Although cattle had grazed the undergrowth, it was difficult to manage the stock in such a place. There are family stories of the adventures in trying to muster the stock for sale.

Aerial View of the top end of the Mobbs Farm

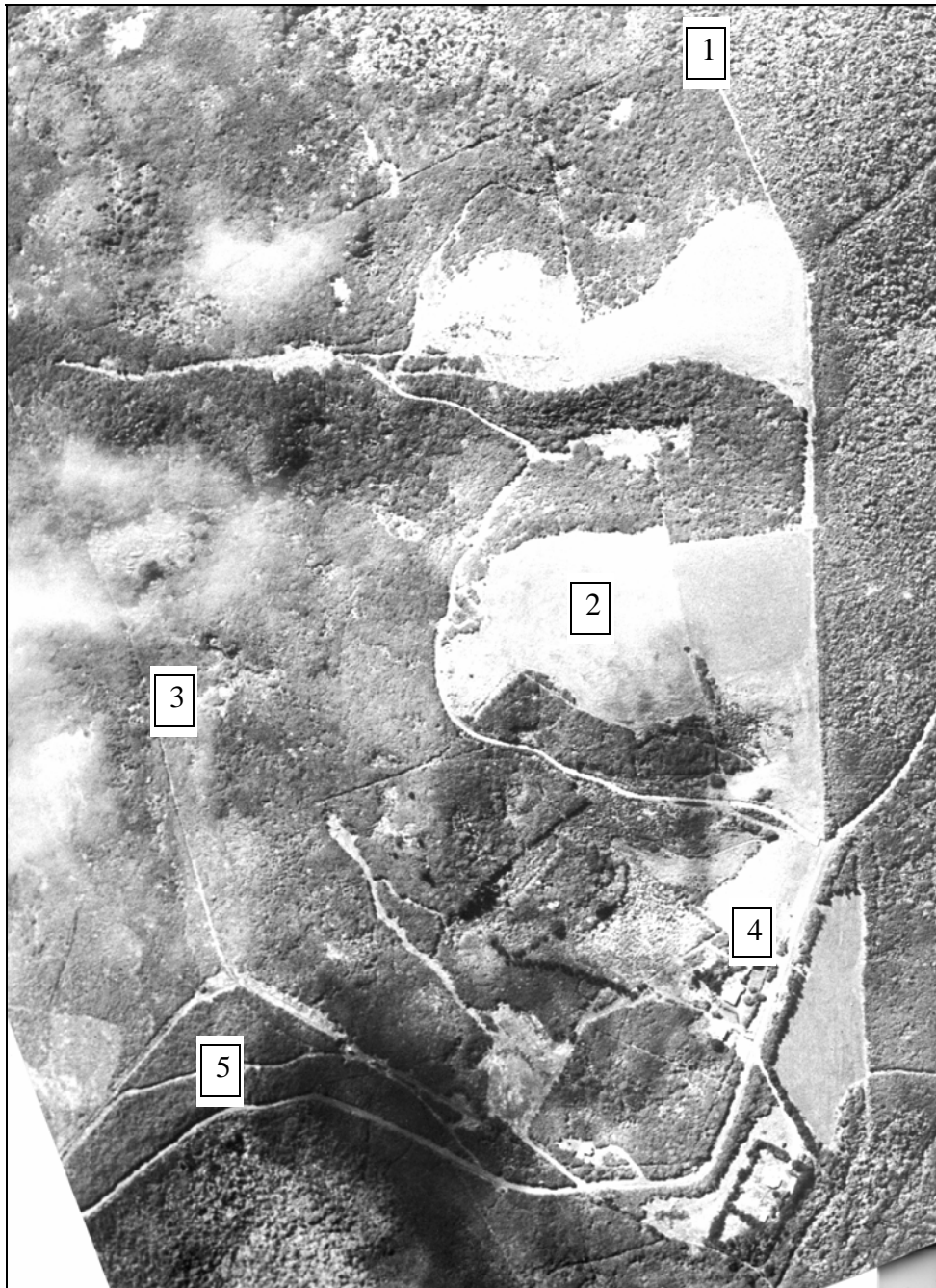


Photo: Sourced from NZAM Survey 583 of 1955

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Photo features (from the top).

1. Top right corner: Centennial Park and Mobbs boundary fence.
2. Centre right: The grassed area of the First and Second Spurs.
3. Middle left: Centennial Park and Mobbs boundary fence.
4. Bottom right: Mobbs Farmhouse and neighbours: Hunt's, Perrin's and Ryan properties.
5. Bottom left: Road boundary fence, Old Road alignment and current Anawhata Road alignment.

Sometime in the 1942 to 44 period, the Park Board bought these steep bush clad areas from Horace. Part of the deal was that Horace contracted to erect the new boundary fence. During the latter phases of World War II and as a youngster, I helped Uncle win the posts from the adjoining bush for that fence line.

Winning posts was nothing new to Horace. My Dad tells of the days that during the depression years, he helped Horace spilt totara and kauri posts in the bush. They humped them out to the road for transporting to Henderson with the bullock team and wagon. The price delivered was six pounds ten shillings per hundred for split kauri and ten pounds ten shillings per hundred for totara.¹

Constructing the new fence line provided yet another challenge for Horace. As it was wartime, he had little access to helping hands or mechanical appliances to make the work easy. The steepness of the terrain, the density of the undergrowth and the extent of the work added to the effort. But Horace was used to these challenges. They brought out in him, his natural innovative streak and the jobs always got done.

Finding the trees suitable for posts was the first challenge. Totara was preferred because of its durability, easy splitting and lightness. The steep sided valley hid many fallen totara trees amongst the undergrowth. I well remember, as a child of 7, accompanying him on his hunt. We'd struggle our way through the undergrowth, sometimes fighting the cutty grass, kie kie and supplejack entanglements. Horace's uncanny sense of discovery, enhanced by his years in

The Anawhata Valley

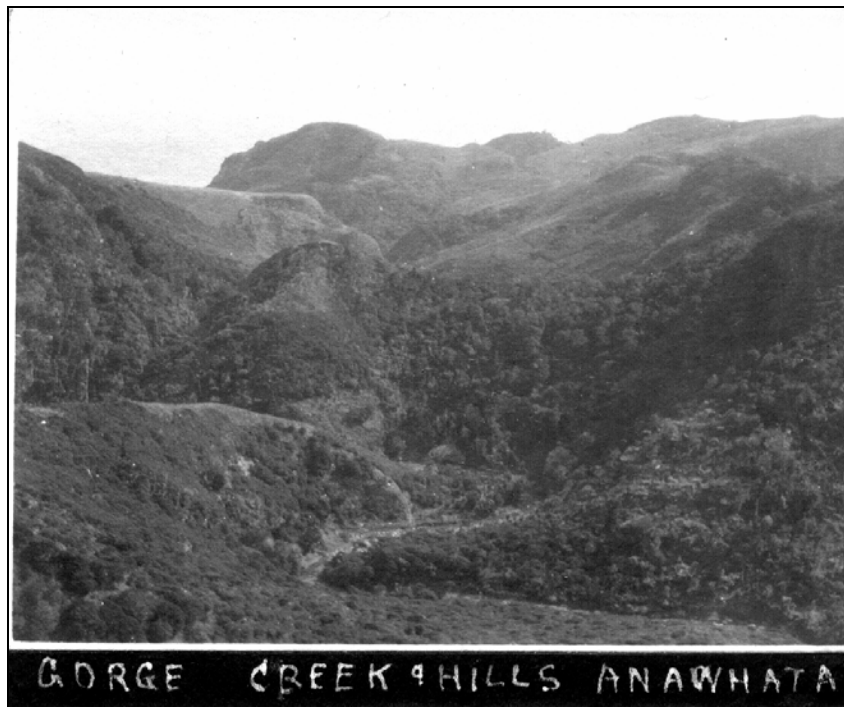


Photo: Arthur Witchurch c.1926 Now in Ryan Family Collection

A photo taken c.1926 of the Anawhata Valley looking downstream towards the Gorge. The land on the left hand side of the stream was that, eventually sold by Horace Mobbs, to the Park Board sometime between 1942 and 1944. The terrain is typical of that from which the posts for the new boundary fence were won.

the bush, would lead us to a fallen tree that was invariably covered with vines, leaf-mould and other vegetation. After clearing away the growth to expose the trunk, he'd swing the axe to test its soundness. A resounding bang and wry smile would indicate that it was 'sound as a bell'. On the other hand, if the blow with the axe resulted in a duller thud, Horace's deadpan response of 'kaikok' meant that the trunk would only be second quality for posts. This was because it was probably infected with a fungal disease that left it 'poxy'. They were left to rot in peace! Further trunk exposure of the good ones would follow to examine the lie of the grain. Straight grain meant easy splitting with axe, maul and wedges. Not all totaras were straight grained. My Dad writes, "Once Uncle Horace and I felled a large totara for posts but we could not split it because of the twisted grain. Uncle said, '*Whom God has joined together, let no man put asunder. Come on boy. Let's go home.*' It is still there today."¹

Cutting the chosen trunks to post lengths saw me swinging on the end of a six foot crosscut saw. (No chainsaws in those days!!) Small as I was, I could at least 'pull' the saw keeping it on line. Invariably the trunks lay 'up and down' on the steep sided valley. The alternative was for Horace to 'fiddle' ie push and pull the saw from one side of the trunk by himself. No doubt he did this often as he usually worked by himself as of necessity. My contribution didn't end there. It fell to me to carry the maul and steel wedges to and from the site. Horace made me a sugarbag pikau to carry the wedges in. The maul I slung over my shoulder. I well remember the rope straps of the pikau cutting into my bony shoulders as we pushed our way through the bush to the log site.

Horace split the posts. Shorter lengths of the trunks were split into battens. The pink hue of the freshly split totara fascinated me. I pulled the posts and battens away from the immediate work site to a stack for moving later.

It was not all hard yakka. We'd stop to boil the billy and have our lunch of sandwiches made from Aunt Nell's homemade bread. A freshly cut stake of lancewood supported the billy over the small fire. Fuelled by dry totara chips, the fire quickly brought the water to the boil. A cupped hand of tealeaves was sprinkled on the boiling water and the lid of the billy replaced to let it brew. Before pouring out the tea, the lid was removed and the side of the billy gently tapped with a stick. The floating tealeaves sank and the clear tea was poured 'over the hand pivot' into the mugs. This technique avoided having to use one's fingers on its hot bottom to effect the pour, thus avoiding a possible painful burn! The break gave us time to take in the fragrances of the earthy leaf mould smells of the freshly disturbed site, the smoke of the billy fire, and the tranquillity that surrounded us. The tranquillity was sometimes punctuated by the chirpy fantails (piwakawakas) feasting continuously on the insects we disturbed. Were they thanking us for the feed of gnats and midges? Or were they telling us to get moving again to generate more food for them!!

Moving the posts to the fence line required some innovative thinking. The tree location was on the opposite side of the valley to the proposed fence. The meagre walking track on the valley sides was studded with obstacles underfoot and the undergrowth caught articles being carried, making it hard work for post extraction. Horace's solution was to span the gully with a No 8 fencing wire, tension it like

that on a violin and 'shoot' the posts across it. Flying Foxes were not new to him. He'd used the technique lifting the pitsawn timber from the Anawhata Beach up to the road in the mid 20's. He'd also used this technique to lift sand from the beach up to the site of Parker's house construction immediately above the beach in the early 30's. On those occasions, a wire rope was used to span the distance and the four horse team 'marched seawards' pulling the loads up the flying fox. For this fencing project, Horace selected a 'landing spot' on the new fence side of the gully to ensure there was an adequate downward slope of the wire. It was my job to drive a staple into each end of the post and threaded an 'S' hook (No 8 wire) through it. Uncle lifted the posts up to the wire, hooked the S hook over it and then gave the post a mighty shove. I well recall the "Wheeeee..." as the post sped, singing its way along the taught wire. (Was it A or D?)!! A muffled 'Kwthudd..' followed as it hit the terminal post and fell to the ground. I'd gather up the S hooks for re-use. The battens being smaller and lighter were carried out in bundles using the access track.

Using a capstan (often called a whim), effected moving the posts up to the fence line from the landing spot of the flying fox. Horace used an old horse cart axle and wheel to form the basis of the device. Adjacent to the fence line, a small circular site was dug out of the bush hillside, sufficient to mount the capstan in the middle. Enough room was allowed for the horse, harnessed to a pole, to walk freely around the capstan. Wire rope stretched down to the post landing site at the foot of the flying fox. After bundling the posts up (may be 10 at a time), the horse was encouraged to amble around the capstan. The bundles of posts waddled their way up the narrow track and eventually reached the capstan. Snagging of the bundles

occurred occasionally. In these circumstances, horse sense prevailed! It would wait patiently until commanded to restart.... a real integral part of the team.

I remember helping spread the posts and battens out along the new fence line. Perhaps the holidays were not long enough for me to be involved in the wiring of the fence as I don't remember its completion. Completed it was though. The fence line became a regular 'beat' when looking for errant cows at milking time on our visits to the farm. Over the many years since construction, it performed its task albeit with maintenance.

Motivated by the writing of this essay, my son and I went back to the fence line to see how it had weathered over the 60 odd years. As I climbed the first spur (hill top) from the farmhouse, I turned to look south and enjoy the views of the old farmhouse precincts and distant Piha. The white caps of the Manukau bar were clearly visible. At the second spur, looking north, the huge panorama of the Anawhata Valley, the rolling hills behind Te Henga and the distant hills of Muriwai with its white surf line lay before me. None of it had changed except for the numbers of white dots on the horizon representing the urban development of the Muriwai environs. It was clear enough also to see the waters of the Kaipara.

We climbed over a recently erected fence that now separates the grass from the bush, and carefully picked our way through the gorse infested fringe. We made our way through the tall teatree towards the now redundant fence line. Although now dismantled, sure enough on the steep slopes, remnants of the original fence

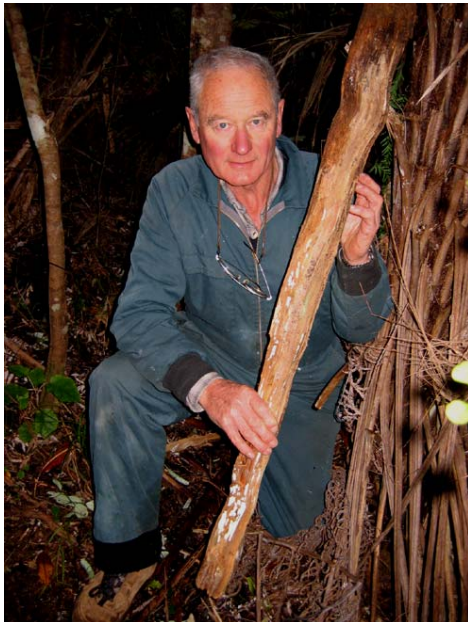
Raymond revisits the site of the original Centennial Park and Mobbs' boundary fence.



An original totara post



A stump of an original post



A split totara batten



One of the cross-cut saws used by Horace

Photos taken by Alister Ryan, July 2004

could be seen. I found the top section of a totara post, and a few totara battens. I took out my pocket knife, and gently but strangely affectionately, cleaned off some of the lichen and grime. I prised off a slither of wood. As I took in the pink hue of the freshly exposed totara, a fantail flitted about me. Its cheeky chatter had not changed either.

Raymond S Ryan

August 2004

Acknowledgments:

1 "Anawhata Yesterdays" by my father, Stanley Gordon Ryan (unpublished)

2 "Arthur David Mead: The Father of the Centennial Memorial Park"

An article for the Friends of Arataki Newsletter, written by

Arnold R Turner CMG December 2003

Sincere thanks to:-

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