

KUAOTUNU

BOOM! BUSTLE! BUST!

The isolated valley of Kuaotunu, with its sandy north facing beach front, did not historically develop to the degree of other Coromandel areas. The simple reason was it did not offer a deep water harbour for safe mooring to unload supplies and equipment or export heavy kauri spars. There was to the west, however, the Whangapoua saw mill and wharves, which at one time was one of the largest mills on the Coromandel.

There are not many compelling clues to Maori settlements in the area either – a few signs of forifications perhaps, and the word “kuaotunu”. There are many differing opinions on the meaning – ‘to inspire fear in young animals’, ‘roasted young’ – perhaps referring to the feasting upon the plentiful eels or mutton birds caught on the Great Barrier Island.

ALL'S QUIET ... UNTIL GOLD!!!

That isolation all changed when gold was first discovered in the area, with traces of

the precious metal found around 1880 in the Waitaia Creek. Most prospectors were more obsessed with proven mining deposits in the Thames and Coromandel areas which peaked from 1868 to 1871. Official figures for production of the Thames Mines recorded a yield of 2,327,619 oz bullion with the value at \$845 million.

Author/historian R. A. Simpson (known as Alf) reports in his book, **This is Kuaotunu**, the more sensational find that happened in 1889 on what was to become known as the ‘Try Fluke’, a reef (quartz vein) on the Bald Spur a mile from the Waitaia Creek area. It was Maori Charles Kawhine, “known locally as Coffin,” who gave the area its name. Prospectors saw him working away and called out to him “what ya doing, Coffin?”

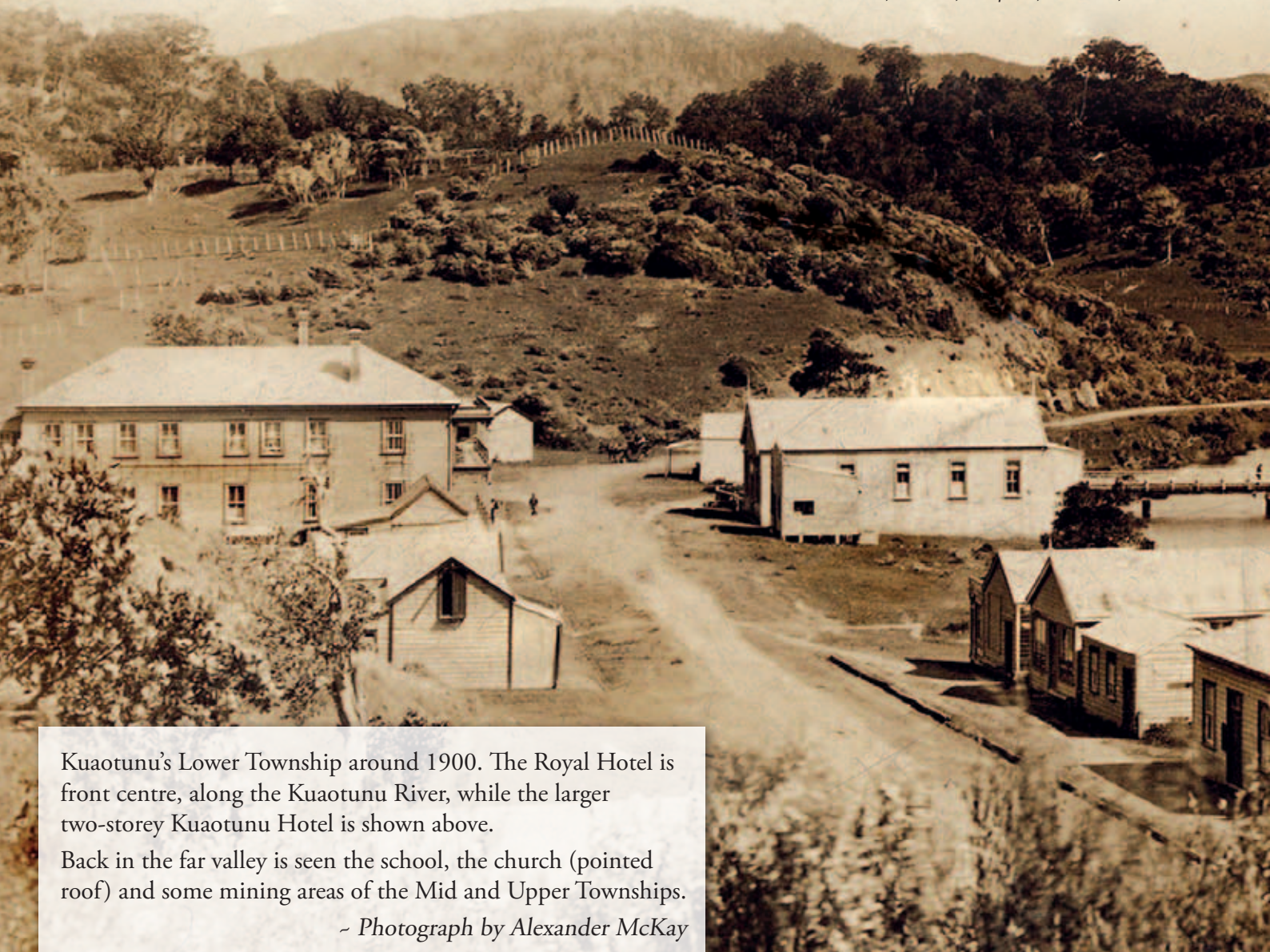
“Oh, Try Fluke,” was his reply. Or what they thought they heard him say. Some think he was just saying “tryin’ luck”, but the name stuck. This outcropping was at an elevation of 650

feet, two-plus miles south of Kuaotunu Beach, and about eight miles from bustling Mercury Bay. When word got out of Kawhine’s rich find, prospectors flooded into the area by horse track or flat beach landing, staking their claims.

About the same time another gold prospector, Alex Peebles, discovered his claim nearby. He later managed two mines, the Great Mercury and the Red Mercury. Peebles is also known for bringing cyanide processing for the extraction of gold from the pounded quartz ore slurry.

Before cyanide, mercury was used for the same purpose; the cyanide allowed more of the gold and silver to be recovered (about 90% of the gold and half the silver) from the pulverized quartz. When this was adopted on a large scale, mines that were formerly not worth the effort, now paid off handsomely.

The steep cliffs of the spur made tunnel-in mining relatively easy. The mines and their stamping batteries had colorful names: *Try Fluke, Carbine, Mariposa, John Bull, Great*



Kuaotunu’s Lower Township around 1900. The Royal Hotel is front centre, along the Kuaotunu River, while the larger two-storey Kuaotunu Hotel is shown above.

Back in the far valley is seen the school, the church (pointed roof) and some mining areas of the Mid and Upper Townships.

~ Photograph by Alexander McKay

Who would guess it now, but in the 1890s, the sleepy Kuaotunu Village was once a bustling gold mining area supporting three townships. The Lower-Township seen here in foreground sported two hotels, a billiard parlor, barber, general stores, tailors, post office, dressmaker, drapery, bakery, butcher, stables, school, chemist, fire brigade,

and even a race horse track around the dunes. The mine areas in the cliffs above the valley supported a cemetery, two churches, boarding houses, another hotel, a School of Mines, band room, rifle club...and more. then the veins gave out... And it all but disappeared

Mercury, Red Mercury, Irene, Waiawa, Otama, the Kapai-Vermont.

Early reports to the Department of Mining show the quartz veins, called reefs, to be one to three feet thick, with some at Try Fluke measuring an impressive three-to-seven feet in thickness. In the early period, the ore would be mined out and stored, awaiting the building of batteries, and later, the vile large vats of cyanide water. Once they were operating, the ore was placed in cars on tracks that led to the road for transport to the crushing batteries. The Kapai-Vermont battery had ore drying ovens to make the ore easier to crush. (See story page 23.)

BY SHIP AND BY ROAD

Work began immediately to build and improve roads. The Matarangi Road was built to serve incoming supplies and equipment from steam boats originating from Auckland. These ships offloaded at Kuaotunu Beach to 'surfboats' which were then offloaded onto wagons pulled

by horses in chest deep water (see photo lower right page 19). Some scows were able to land directly on the beach.

Passengers and supplies (including numerous kegs of 'stagger juice') were loaded and brought ashore. Chaff and oats were shipped in for the many horse teams needed by the mining operations, and coal was imported to fuel the mine's steam driven batteries.

The Matarangi Road offered a path to the mining areas, with the final distance covered by horse track. A second road of five miles, the Mercury Bay to Kuaotunu Road, was later built, and this served also as a route for supplies and new prospectors.

Roads between the areas were muddy messes during rainy season, until finally stabilized with gravel around 1892.

TWO TOWNSHIPS, well THREE

Within a year, Kuaotunu had the makings of a real town, sporting two large hotels (the

Kuaotunu and The Royal), a public building, post office, stores, and other buildings in the flat Lower Township near the beach and two fresh water creeks. A hotel and store were built at the Upper Township as early as 1890, with butcher shop, bakeries, boarding houses and other facilities soon following. There was also a Middle Township around the Red Mercury Battery where Cemetery Hill, two churches, the school, the Rifle Club range, a library, stores, boarding house, and others were located.

Simpson quotes a miner who served later as the proprietor of the Kuaotunu Hotel, Robert Ritchie, about the Lower Township. It included "four stores, several butcher shops, three bakeries, one tailor, two drapers, and a drug store. Everything that was to be required was to be had at our door."

Irish Town, a residential section east of the Kuaotunu River outlet sprouted up in the Lower Township, not far from the two hotels. The hill along the northeast coast was called Black Jack Hill, probably called after the dark zinc related mineral often found in mining.

BY CAROL WRIGHT

*with excerpts from
THIS IS KUAOTUNU
by R. A. "Alf" Simpson*

*Many historic photographs
by Alexander McKay*





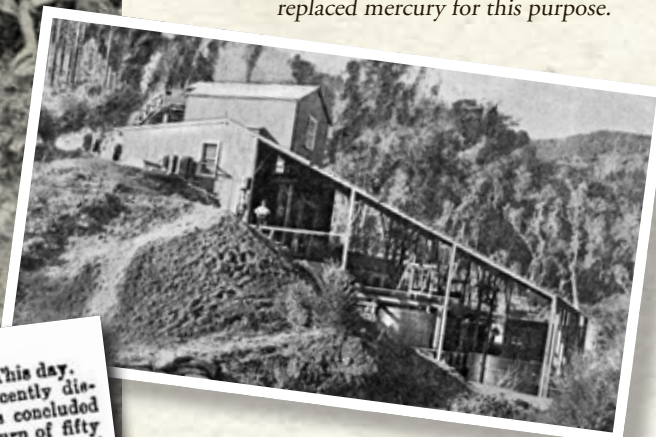
Miners from the main lower level shaft of the Try Fluke and Kapai-Vermont mine. Front row from left: Sam Stevens, William Edgar, R. Port, Dick Hardman. Second row: W. McLaughlan, Bob Fraser, J. Jones, Tom Foster, Jack Ferguson, H. Kerr, Tom Cahill, George Horn. On top: Stewart Taggart, Duncan McTavish, Bill Robinson, Bill Sewell, Donald McDonald, George Wallace, Charlie Horn.

THE FLUKE ORE

AUCKLAND, This day. The first crushing on the recently discovered Kuaotunai goldfield was concluded on Saturday for the splendid return of fifty tons of Try Fluke ore crushed for a yield of 267 ounces gold. A number of shares in this mine are held in the south. Other claims are now about to crush at the Try Fluke battery.



The Mountain King battery with series of large cyanide laced settling tanks to treat the gold laden slurry of crushed quartz ore. Cyanide replaced mercury for this purpose.



THE STAMPING BATTERIES

Meanwhile back in the valleys (the Mid and Upper Townships), each mine constructed buildings to hold the steam engine powered 'batteries,' mechanical stamping machines that pulverized the quartz ore into fine powder. By 1892, this powder was treated in large vats using the chemical cyanide. The resulting liquid slurry was then processed to isolate only the gold which settled to the bottom of the slag. This dust was then melted into ingots.

The Try Fluke mine was the first to build its batteries in 1890; it had ten stampers operating at once. Other mines quickly followed with their own facilities, and heavy pounding filled the valleys nonstop, day and night.

Writes Simpson, "The thunder of the heavy stamps, each of about 8 hundred weight,



Left: The Try Fluke mine and battery. Far Left: miners push carts from shaft. Above Left: Quartz ore was tracked down to the stamping batteries for pulverizing.



Above: Kuaotunu Lower Township seen from south. Thompson Store (facing us on right) sits next to the bakery, barely visible behind hillside.

Right: Another view of Lower Township. Tailor shop (lower left of photo) was later rescued and is now a studio in Whenuakite (ee page 51). It sits across from Thompson Store with bakery in foreground and beyond is two story Kuaotunu Hotel. The road going east is Irishtown Road which led to the residential district.

- Photographs by Alexander McKay



KUAOTUNU

TOWN & MINES

with ten to each battery, was sent vibrating down the valley and could be heard plainly at all hours in the Lower Township, over two miles away."

THE TOWN MATURES

After a few years, metal roads replaced the muddy tracks, and the social life of the townships improved with its 'splendid type of men and women' with little crime. Lines of buses or buggies served the area. A new school was built, along with a modern post office, a well stocked public library, and two churches near the school (a Catholic church and the Undemoninational Church).

Kuaotunu had its own brass band, formed in 1893 by Samuel Carlyon, and even a band building! A rifle club had many keen members and a 1000 yard range on the Simpson property off Cemetery Road. Horse races were held by the Kuaotunu Jockey Club, run in a track around the sand dunes.

The town sported a billiard parlour run by Charlie McNeish, a Maori who also ran the barber shop. His leg had been amputated below the knee, so he tottered around on a pegleg. McNeish, self taught, was known for quoting Shakespeare and Bobbie Burns and for his dramatic drunken 'sprees'. Once he passed out next to an old puriri tree, and awoke hours later to find his pegleg nailed to the trunk!

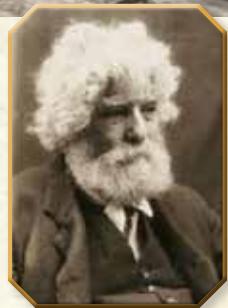
And he could also be a town hero (see story page 23).

Right is a political cartoon of McNeish from New Zealand Observer.



Below: Ships would have made a flat beach landing with scows or used small boats and horsedrawn transfer wagons to get ashore.





Photographer & Geologist Alexander McKay

There are many remarkable historical photos of the Coromandel in the late 1800s, most missing their photo credits. But we suspect many of the good ones were taken by geologist Alexander McKay.

Rebecca Simpson told us it was thought

McKay took the photo on page 16 with a new lens he had shaped from the bottom of a whiskey bottle – another example of Kiwi 'no. 8 wire' ingenuity. It is believed he also used some lens elements from opera binoculars and developed a lens to take microscopic photos of rock slices.

He is credited with designing the telephoto lenses in 1883 or 1884, an invention he never patented.

McKay used his photograph to illustrate his geological survey reports, specifically about the gold regions, but also about the fossils and earthquake faults of New Zealand. He was an avid, almost rabid, geologist, self taught but under mentorship of more learned geologists. McKay, though, was a free thinker, and expressed many of his unique theories, tangling with the well-educated geologists of his day. Ever the character, he even answered one debate as poetry.

Learn more from the book titled *The Real McKay* or visit the Alexander McKay Geological Museum at the Victoria University, Kelburn, Wellington. To see a flipthrough book scan of a pristine-condition geologic report, search for "Rocks of Cape Colville Peninsula, NZ" by Prof. Sollas, with notes and photographs by McKay. The report contains high quality scenic and mine photos of the Coromandel region.



A rugby club of some renown was established with players drawn from the ranks of the rugged miners. Of course, any match was accompanied by a fine dinner at one of the hotels to honour the visiting team. Such affairs offered entertainment and 'much speechifying'. Above is team from 1911.

Left: Kauri was not main industry of the area, but mines need timber both for building and to fire the ore ovens. Here bushmen travel by train to the work area, some bringing their dogs.

Kuaotunu's All the Go!

*Kuaotunu's all the go,
Kuaotunu ! Kuaotunu !
We'll step it out, both heel and toe,
For golden Kuaotunu.*

*Then come with me and look around,
And view the claims upon the ground,
Where lots of 'sugar' may be found
In golden Kuaotunu.*

Chorus: Kuaotunu, &c.

*Try Fluke is tried, and proved to be
The mine of mines that's sure to gee,
With Keystone and with Victory,
In golden Kuaotunu.*

*From Try Fluke, if the day is fine.
We step across and view Carbine
And Mariposa, in the line
Of gold, in Kuaotunu.*

*And if Red Mercury should rise,
The Great may give us a surprise,
and near it find a Secret prize
In golden Kuaotunu.*

*We hope to meet a happy fate
In going through the Golden Gate,
And Just in Time, if not too late,
May boom in Kuaotunu.*

*When homeward bound we meet John Bull,
and Nelson by the hand we pull,
And then with Surplus we are full
Of golden Kuaotunu.*

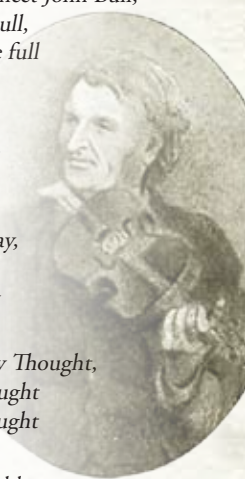
*Don Pedro, Patience, Jubilee,
and Bandoleer we next to see,
And they cry out for Victory,
In golden Kuaotunu.*

*And should we step a little way,
Bonanzas are a card to play,
For ounces four is sure to pay
In golden Kuaotunu.*

*From Maori Dream to Happy Thought,
The Precious metal's being sought
and Labour's battle's being fought
In golden Kuaotunu.*

*Three cheers for Kuaotunu field;
May every claim ten ounces yield,
And all the Fates with favour shield
This golden Kuaotunu.*

Dance song written in 1890 soon after gold was discovered in Kuaotunu. Many mine names are woven into the lyrics. Published in *The Observer*.



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A CIVIL – AND FASHIONABLE – SOCIETY

A drama club was formed in the late 1890s, and the town enjoyed performances by visiting opera companies, drama groups, wrestlers, and even a circus. But the prime excitement came when Mr. A. W. Whitehouse brought his electric Kinematograph exhibit (moving pictures) to town. The much anticipated movies filled the hall to overflowing and multiple shows had to be scheduled. These activities were scheduled in Loram's Hall (opposite the Kuaotunu Hotel) which also served as the school rooms during the day.

Kuaotunu also had a fire brigade; first with buckets and then a more showy, but admittedly less effective, pump. It was operated by one man on each side and as Simpson writes, "After some anxious minutes water at the rate of 10 gallons per 10 min, more or less found its way to the reduction nozzle at the end of the hose. ... The brigade was famous not so much for the fires it extinguished as for those it failed to get under control."

The most memorable fire was at one of the hotels; and when it was obvious it could not be saved, the firefighters were told "she's gone boys, it's all yours now." At which time they all ran "with superhuman effort" to the bar's cellar and rescued crates of liquor. "The following day, there were a few absentees from work."

Another later fire at the Royal Hotel had a particular hero, the axe-wielding Mick O'Connor who swung with focused action at the wall until the source of the flames was revealed. The bucket brigade put out the flames and ended their waterworks with buckets being poured over O'Connor himself as his whiskers were in danger of catching fire.

From 1891, Kuaotunu had its own resident physician, **Dr. Barnes** (pictured below), who also serviced Mercury Bay and other locales. For this travel, he was provided a horse, but not being an avid horseman, often chose to walk, leading the horse over the tracks. A source of local amusement would

be to watch him catch his horse. Simpson writes:

"He was not what one would term a horseman and had a rather novel method of catching his horse in the paddock. Like so many badly trained horses, it had a habit of walking to the far end of the field, 'fortunately a small one,' and on being approached would present the wrong end for the reception of the bridle. The doctor, overcame the difficulty with a long forked stick. He gingerly placed the forked end in the horse's mane, and with a twisting motion entangled it in the fork and was thus able to draw the horse's business end towards him and eventually place the bridle correctly on the beast's head. The rest was easy, for the animal did lead reasonably well."



The Barnes, an English mining couple, make do with a temporary accommodation in Midas Gully. Town dressmakers ensured women could still be fashionable.

Kuaotunu Gossip from the New Zealand Observer

In 1890's fashion,
this wedding
party includes the
McManus sisters,
who ran the Royal
Hotel (front row,
positions 1, 3, & 5).

The postponed social took place on Monday night, and was a great success. As promised the O.M. was there but would not undertake to give any description. Suffice to say the ladies looked quite too charming. In fact some of them must have been wanting to go to a ball.... Who were those young men in the corner of the hall that lightened the plates so much and so often?... What will those young ladies at the Try Fluke do now that J.M. has left? Perhaps he has another brother? How would R.L. do?... A.S. and Miss L. are with us again. Get the tin-cans ready as soon as you like boys.



The 'Royal' is the hotel near the Kuaotunu Hotel that was destroyed by fire in 1896 (see story at left).

What is it to be, Bob—Arthur or Jack with Annie at the Royal? I think Arthur can win easy; he is first favourite, and the odds is level money now.
The tailor is left all alone now. I wonder if the fair Ruby will ever return to him. There are a few grey hairs already.
What makes Jack look so downhearted lately; has Kate thrown him over?
I have done with Kuaotunu for this week; So all you men that work do seek I hope to Kuaotunu you will steer. So roll up quick for Loram's beer.

D.S. is very quiet since D.C. went away. ... Too bad of Miss O. to give J.F. the slip on Sunday night... L.L. does admire the ring very much. Don't take it off, L., or you might catch cold.

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Kuaotunu School in 1890s



Kuaotunu School in 1904.

SCHOOLS AND THE LAW

The first school opened in August 1891 at the public hall (Loram's Hall) in the lower Township opposite the Kuaotunu Hotel (see map p19). A year or so later a separate school was built and a proper education committee formed. Enrolment in those first few years numbered around 84.

There was no resident policeman in Kuaotunu, and property quarrels and crimes were dealt with by Constable Rist who was stationed in Mercury Bay. His range spread from Tairua to Matarangi, yet he always tried to be there "when any jollification was on the boards". A lockup and dedicated policeman were proposed, but the expense wasn't justified as the town was in decline.

So law abiding citizens had to tolerate the miners' frequent drunken brawls, sometimes as entertainment. The lack of law however, fostered a side business – a whiskey still was hidden in a secluded gulley along what became known as 'Whiskey Creek'. (Obviously, not so hidden with a name like that!) The enterprising Scott and Kelly distilled the "water of life" for the mining community, and the beverage was held in some esteem as far away as Auckland.

GOLD PETERS OUT... TOWN FOLLOWS

In its prime, Kuaotunu boasted a population of well over a thousand. By 1909, most of

the mines were closed and many batteries taken apart. Also that year, the timber mills around Mercury Bay were closing, but some enterprising entrepreneurs opened up a dairy factory at Mercury Bay, offering an outlet for Kuaotunu's milk producers.

As nearby farmland became available for lease, some mining families turned to farming or raising cattle, dairy cows or sheep. A livestock auction location opened up in Mercury Bay in 1918, and it was quite an adventure driving the animals all that distance. With so many local boys going off to WWI, the town was sapped of its vitality. Many of Kuaotunu's buildings were being dismantled or moved to other places. In 1917, the Kuaotunu Hotel was sold and moved to Waitakaruru. The public hall was sold and moved by scow to the Bay of Plenty. The Royal Hotel was dismembered 1920; it was rebuilt in Pukemiro as a boarding house for coal miners. The post office managed to keep operating until 1947; Robin Smith of Mercury Bay bought and dismantled the structure, using the timber to build his own home.

The school's enrolment dropped so low that the school was closed in 1949, with remaining children taught by correspondence classes until a bus was arranged to transport children to Mercury Bay School.

With gold mining the focus of Kuaotunu, the stately kauri forests were not felled until 1921, when a timber company clearcut the land. However there was continuing heavy demand for wood to fuel the ore ovens.

KUAOTUNU OFF-THE-GRID

Kuaotunu remained a sleepy little town, with perhaps a hundred permanent residents and a few stores. The area was electrified in 1961, followed by phone service. The road from Mercury Bay became an official state highway, SH25. Some of the native trees and plants were regrowing in the fire scarred areas, and even the slowgrowing kauri were attempting a comeback, some as tall as three metres by the mid-sixties.

As more and more holiday makers discovered the beautiful beaches of the area, summer time began bustling with family bach rentals, caravans, bikers, campers and boaters. The boat ramp now boasts perhaps a hundred launches per summer day.

However in the off-season, the town reverts back to its 'off the grid' mentality, settling back into a peaceful place with quiet reverence for nature, the sea; for art and handcrafted living.

A saying of the area pioneers — "Work hard and live cheap" — still persists, but now with time for flat whites. And wifi...



R.A. Simpson, aka "Alf", wrote **This is Kuaotunu**. He was also the bus driver for the first and second Kuaotunu school buses, needed because the local school closed as enrollment dropped.

ARTICLE SOURCES

Much of this article about the fascinating Kuaotunu region was obtained from the well researched book by R.A. "Alf" Simpson, **This is Kuaotunu**, first published in 1956, with updated publication in 1964.



Simpson, seen left as driver of school buses, was born just a few years before the 1889 discovery of gold at the Try Fluke claim. Simpsons Beach, north of Buffalo Beach is named after the family and Simpson's father operated stables in the Kuaotunu Lower Township near the beach. Eventually, there were so many Simpson boys, they had the Simpson Family Rugby Team.

We thank Rebecca Simpson (granddaughter, now living in Kuaotunu) for permission to excerpt from the book, and providing many additional images as well. See more photos at the Mercury Bay Museum or Kuaotunu Hall. His book can be purchased at Kuaotunu Store, Luke's Gallery & Cafe or the Mercury Bay Museum.

We gleaned additional information and images from those who currently own property on the original mining land: Alastair Brickell of Stargazers B&B, Lutz Gaebler of Try Fluke Studios and Mark Tugendhaft and Nedilka Radjkovich of Coffee LaLa.

Most old news clips were found at <http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz>.