

OIROA GUMMER

Oiroa has lived through the reign of five monarchs. When she was born in 1900 at Moawhango a village inland from Taihape, there was no railway and the only form of transport was by foot, horseback, or coach. Tourist coaches used to stop overnight at Moawhango on their way north to the Lakes District.

Being up to four days' journey from Wanganui or Napier, Moawhango people were essentially self-sufficient, maori and pakeha depending on each other. *That* - and her father owing his life to maori for rescuing him when shipwrecked off the coast of Napier - *that's* how Oiroa and her brothers and sister were given and known by their maori names.

Except for some Snelling relations, Oiroa as a child had few companions. Life centred around her family, and at an early age she was playing the organ for her parents' Sunday School. When five years old, she and her parents went to England to visit Batley and Snelling grandparents. Governesses provided her early education, and her sister Miriam's.

These two sisters went to Woodford House in Havelock North to further their education. On leave, they would visit the Chambers family, where they met their future husbands. Bill Gummer, an architect, designed homes for the Chambers family.

These sisters would ride 15 miles on horseback to dances in Taihape, and in 1916 Oiroa was playing the piano there at patriotic concerts to raise funds and fervour for World War I.

At age 21 Oiroa and her mother went to England to visit her Snelling grandparents. President Clemenceau of France boarded their ship, sat with them on deck, shared their table, and asked Oi to play for him. Afterwards he autographed her programme adding the words "Une Artiste Rare".

She married Bill Gummer at the Moawhango homestead in 1923, and moved to Auckland where Bill designed their house in Epsom called "Stoneways". John was born in 1925 followed by Geoff and Graeme.

During the 1930s, Oi played chamber music extensively, joining with the Fenton sisters when the Auckland String Players was founded - later to become the Auckland Chamber Music Society. She was fortunate then to have the help of the Robertson girls in looking after the children.

She joined a "reading circle", a group of women who selected, read, and discussed books, enjoying sumptuous afternoon teas at each others' houses. Friendships developed in this way lasted 60 years and more.

During the 1930s she welcomed at "Stoneways" a number of musical refugees from Europe fleeing political turmoil. In World War II, she entertained many young American soldiers, providing them with a diet of home life, home cooking and music, prior to their departure to the battlefields of the Pacific. She liked being a hostess.

Oiroa frequented Auckland concerts by locals like Owen Jensen and Ina Bosworth in the Tower Tea Rooms, and by internationals in the Town Hall and Concert Chamber. In the late 40s she became a friend of viola player Winifred Stiles and regularly attended Music Schools at Cambridge.

After her son Geoff died in the mid-1950s, Oi and her husband moved to a home in rural South Auckland. Bill Gummer died in the 1960s and Oi moved to Remuera where she was happy to live until she was 80.

She maintained contact with her relatives at Moawhango, outliving all her brothers and sisters. Later, in her cottage at Meadowbank Village, she continued playing chamber music with her friends. She liked to visit the [so-called] 'old folk' in the hospital, taking them flowers, sitting with them, or reading to them. Some of these 'old folk' were 20 years her junior.

I'm reminded of how Rhonda Hessel spoke of her *organising* ability: . . . Oi would phone Rhonda asking "When could we arrange to have some music together?" I want you to feel *completely free* to decide when you come, *completely free* "Now, how would Sunday afternoon at 3pm do!"

As one local said 'It got him in the end!
suffering'. Though Rota was long-suffering in his illness, he still lived to the age of 93.

I will farewell Oi with a lullaby well-known to Moawhango people, *E hine, e hine, ee*

[Farewell!]
No reira Oiroa, ka mutu tenei poroporoaki. No reira, haere, haere, haere atu ra!

