

From "Provincial Pride" No7, August 1961

A LINK WITH THE PAST

Anyone passing along Carnarvon Street in Arrowtown on a fine afternoon, may chance to see a little old lady seated in an armchair on a sunny verandah, and may guess that in thought she is back in the Nevis Valley, one of the most isolated areas in Otago, where she spent 60 years of her long life.

The ship "Flying Mist" reached Bluff on August 26th, 1862, and among her passengers was the Elliott family from the Border Country of Scotland, William Elliott being in charge of a flock of sheep. A daughter Helen Miller was born in Invercargill on October 7th, 1863. A year or two later the family came to the Wakatipu, Elliott being employed as a boundary keeper by Kawarau station, and their home was a cottage at the foot of the Remarkables, close to the junction of Boundary Creek with the Kawarau River. Some trees still mark the spot. When they reached school age, the children had to travel some distance up the river over which a miner rowed them, then tramp several miles to the Shotover school. On Sundays the family had a still longer walk to the punt and from there on to the little church at Frankton, part of the wide parish of the pioneer minister Rev. Donald Ross.

When Helen was about nine or ten her father was shifted to a new post at Upper Nevis, his wages being £60 a year plus mutton and certain rations such as flour, tea, sugar etc., and the right to run a few head of cattle. To reach their new home Helen and her sister left the Shotover by coach in the early morning and were met by their father with riding horses at Gibbston. They had a long climb over the range and long after dark arrived tired and weary at their destination.

In the 1870's the Nevis Valley had a large mining population including about 150 Chinese. All supplies had to be brought over the 4,000 foot Carrick Range from Cromwell by pack horse or bullock dray, two of the bullockies being Harrison and English.

There was then no school at Nevis and Helen for a time attended Bannockburn, staying at the Kawarau station Homestead on the Bannockburn side of the range.

One of her vivid memories is the terrible winter of 1878 when heavy snow commenced to fall on May 10th and quite isolated the community till the following spring.

Thousands of sheep perished and a man named Graham contracted with the station to skin them at so much a head when the spring thaw came. He earned sufficient to start him on a farm on the Crown Terrace. Later the Graham family moved to the Otama district where they farmed very successfully.

The strenuous high country life finally forced Elliott to seek other work and he built a hotel at Nevis Crossing, later buying out O'Connell's hotel at the township six miles up the valley. This hotel in conjunction with a store, butcher's shop and billiard room, was carried on by Mrs. Elliott after her husband's death.

With the severe frosts, all mining came to a standstill in winter and the Chinese in particular frequented the billiard room where a good coal fire always burned. The subject of this sketch always speaks well of the Chinese as honest, industrious people. "Treat a Chinaman well and you'll find that he'll treat you well," she says.

One of her memories is of the Rev. Alexander Don striding up the valley on his periodical visits to the Chinese miners. He was a noted walker and was readily recognisable by the topee or sun helmet which he always wore in summer.

Helen eventually married James Ritchie who was wagoning between Nevis and Cromwell and their family of six grew to adulthood in the valley. Mrs. Ritchie was to witness

many events and changes. She has seen a dray load of coal cross the Nevis River on the ice. She has witnessed the same ice breaking up, its jagged edges cutting the piles of a bridge till the structure collapsed. She saw the coming of the rabbit plague and the transition from miner's cradle to hydraulic nozzle, and the creaking, grinding buckets of the dredge. She saw the passing of the bullocks, the horse and buggy and the wagon teams and the advent of the motor car and lorry. In her day there were five dredges and seven sluicing claims in operation while now the valley is silent and almost deserted.

Finally, she and her husband decided to move closer to a town and about 1935 came to a stone cottage at Arrow Junction. Some twenty years later, Mr. Ritchie having passed on, Mrs. Ritchie and a widowed daughter, Mrs. Shaw, moved to the present home in Arrowtown.

The writer has been privileged to have an occasional game of crib and many talks with this old lady, now in her ninety-eighth year. Though her eyesight and hearing are not what they were, her mind remains wonderfully clear and it has been a great pleasure to listen to her tales of the lonely Nevis Valley, that was her home for so long.

E. S.