

# Settling our soldiers

Marisa King

**B**roke down under its own weight." "A total failure." "One of the greatest disasters in social planning New Zealand has ever known." These are all descriptions that have been levelled at New Zealand's post-World War I soldiers' settlement scheme.

The scheme was driven by the desire of William Massey and his Reform government to give returned soldiers the opportunity to experience a rural lifestyle. Under the 1915 Discharged Soldiers Settlement Act, those who had served overseas in the New Zealand Expeditionary Force (NZEF) or naval forces could apply for land that was set aside for discharged soldiers. Land could be bought or leased (most opted to lease), and loan money was available for clearing, fencing and draining; to erect buildings, and to buy farm supplies.

Controversy surrounded the scheme almost from the start, and since its demise, many historians have identified its perceived litany of shortcomings. Historian Ashley Gould, who wrote a pivotal thesis on the scheme in 1992, summarised the "received wisdom" as follows:

- Poor government planning led to the booming wartime land market becoming wildly over-inflated.
- Young and inexperienced soldiers with minimal capital were placed on backcountry bushland or sections that were too small to be economical. They all carried large financial commitments – either leases based on unrealistic capital values or high mortgages.
- The 1921 depression in commodity prices left the soldier settlers in dire financial straits. The termination of the wartime commandeer purchase agreements with the Imperial government made matters worse.
- Poor prices for produce, high costs for improvements, the cost of stock and inept subdivision forced the returned soldiers to "walk off" in defeat.
- Any ex-soldiers who survived the 1920s were eventually dispatched by the Great Depression of the 1930s.

However, recent evaluations of the scheme have improved somewhat. Several historians have acknowledged that the scheme produced both failures and successes. In his thesis, Ashley Gould argued that more ex-soldiers had survived on their farms than was generally recognised and that any perceived betrayal of them by the state was caused by the soldiers' own expectations and the community's expectations of them.

I wandered into this interesting historical debate last year as a distance student at Massey University. As part of a Graduate Certificate in Arts (Creative Writing), I chose for my final elective paper a course focused on New Zealand history between the two world wars. In one lecture, New Zealand's role in World War I and the post-war soldiers' settlement scheme was discussed.

I was aware that my grandfather, who served in the NZEF, had received a soldiers' farm at Te Horo on the Kapiti Coast at a settlement known as Pukenumu. For my final assignment, I researched the history of the settlement in order to assess its relative success. I looked at local and national historical records and talked to my 99-year-old uncle, Eric King, who grew up on the farm.



Above: Family visitors at the farm. PHOTO/SUPPLIED

I also visited the site of my grandparents' previous farm, where their old homestead is still standing. I reached the conclusion that while the Pukenamu settlement could not be declared an all-round success, it was far from being a total failure.

## The settlement

Pukenamu, near Te Horo Beach, was a 730-acre settlement comprising eight sections. All were leased and used for dairy farming. The land was described in the Settlement of Crown Lands Annual Report of 1919 as "mostly good swamp land and partly sandy downs. Very suitable for fattening, grazing and dairying, especially for the latter, owing to the fine climate."

While hardly backcountry bush, Pukenamu was isolated. Uncle Eric rode a horse to school each day with his older brother. He remembers the day his father decided they needed a new radio:

"He biked up to Te Horo and got a lift with one of the trucks that was taking the vegetables to Wellington. He got a radio from a second-hand shop there. To get back, he had to sit up on top of the canvas cover on the back of the truck, nursing the radio. Back at Te Horo he got his pushbike, put the radio on the handlebars, and walked back to the farm."

The quality of the land at Pukenamu was also doubtful, he says.

"It was a miserable sort of a place. In the winter, when it rained, everything was under water more or less ... The paddocks were covered knee-deep ... In the summer, everything would die out, and you wouldn't have much grass."

Unbelievably, there were also sand hills at the beach end of the farms, where the soldier settler families picnicked in warm weather.

Later, I learned the Pukenamu land was once owned by James Gear, a butcher who diversified into farming. It was apparently used to grow oats for chaff to feed Gear's teams of horses. After a number of years, Gear left the land without sowing grass seed, hence its barrenness. In about 1895, a large drain was also dug across the Gear farm, which would have been swamp land at the time. It is believed this resulted in the land being drained too quickly, leading to its terrible dryness.

Soldiers' settlement farms were often accused of being too small to be economic, especially when export prices fell. By modern standards, the Pukenamu farms, such as my grandfather's, which comprised 100 acres housing 40 dairy cows, were certainly modest. However, there is conflicting information as to whether they were inherently uneconomic. Ted Gawler, who went on to become one of Te Horo's most well-known



and successful farmers, bought a farm from a Pukenamu settler (name unknown) in 1933. He subdivided the four paddocks into smaller paddocks, allowing some of them to lie fallow. Things gradually improved, and the farm became profitable.



## The war settlers

During research, I was able to piece together scraps of information about the soldier settlers who came (and went) at Pukenamu.

In March 1918, the *Evening Post* reported that the first three Pukenamu sections had been allocated by the Wellington Land Board to settlers R. Thompson, A. Rossiter and T. Edwards. Five months later, the *New Zealand Times* said a fourth section was allocated to an unnamed settler, who I was able to identify through archival records as being D. Grant. Records show a further three sections were allocated in August 1918 to settlers R. Allan, G. King (my grandfather) and J. Trembath, while the eighth and final section was allocated to W. Patten in September that same year.

Typically, on soldier settlement farms, there was some initial shuffling of occupiers in the first year or two before things settled down. At Pukenamu, Messrs Rossiter and Allan had departed by 1921 to be replaced by



Robert King (Granddad's brother, who moved to Pukenamu in 1920) and W. Jamieson.

But by 1928, Messrs

Edwards, Patten and Jamieson had also left Pukenamu to be replaced by E. Cleland and C. Walker. A sad article in the *Manawatu Standard* in 2006 related how William Patten's farm was wiped out by flooding. It appears his land was subsequently added to the farm next door occupied by J. Trembath.

My grandfather and his brother provide something of a case study of the types of lives the Pukenamu settlers may have had before taking up farming.

Robert King was born at Blacks Point near Reefton in 1891, while his brother, George (my grandfather) was born in 1893 at Lyell in the Buller Gorge. Their father was a gold miner. Their parents separated when they were nine and seven, respectively, after which they

FAR LEFT: Painting by Eric King of the old farmhouse at Pukenamu.

PAINTING/ÖTAKI HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
LEFT: Dorothy and George King in 1935.

BOTTOM: Brothers Eric (left) and George King with the family car, 1930.

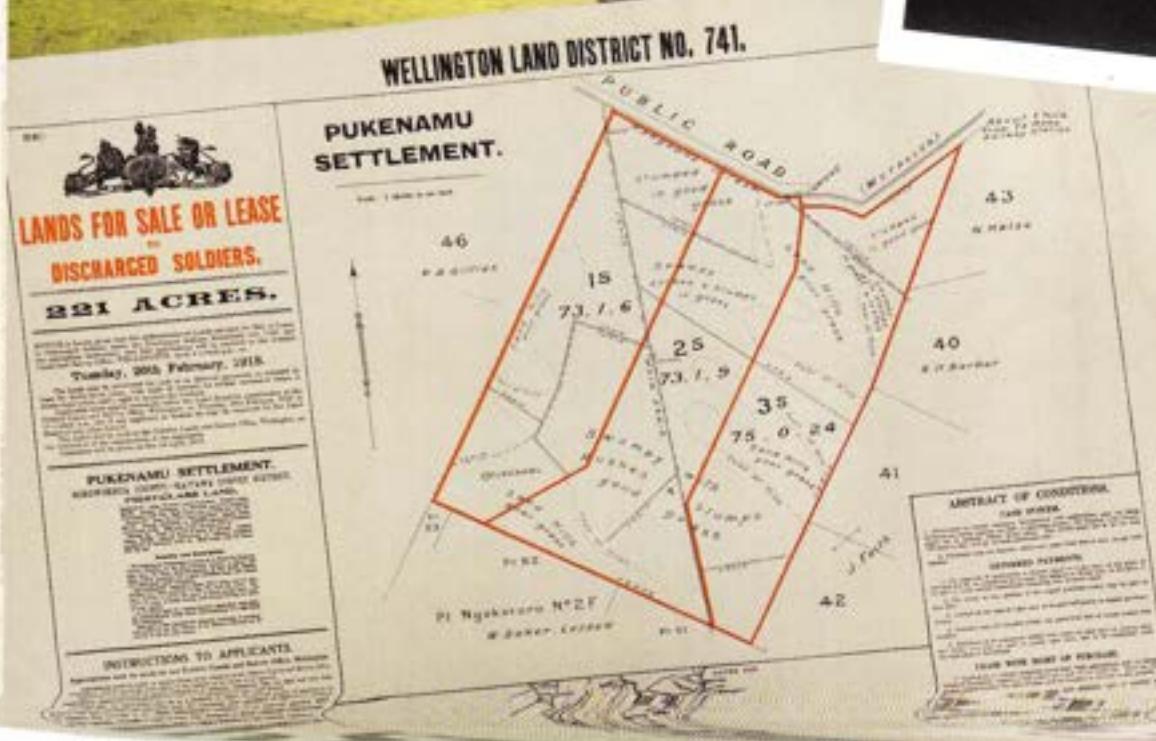
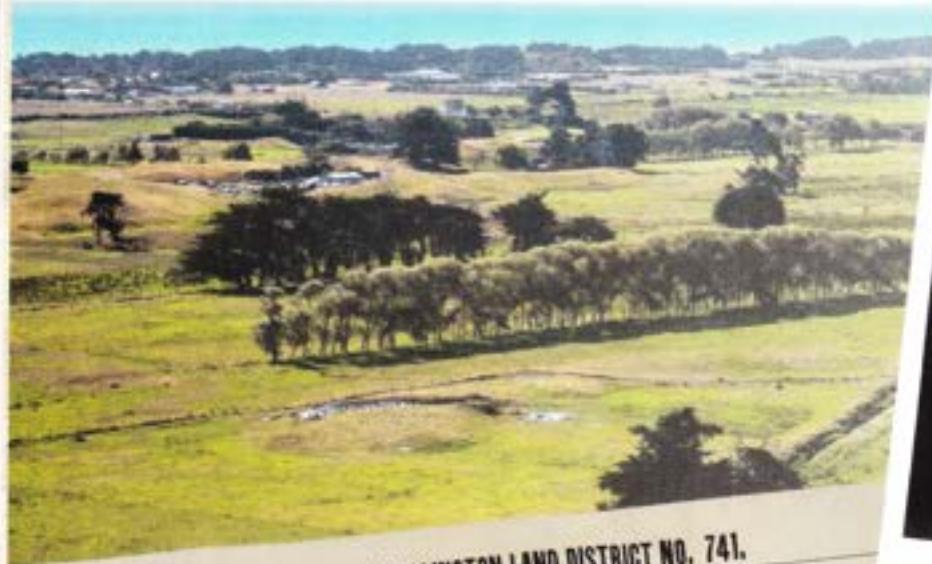
lived in an orphanage and a children's home. In 1915, they both enlisted with the World War I NZEF.

George fought at Passchendaele and the Somme before returning to New Zealand two and a half years later with two medals and a wired jaw after a shrapnel wound severed his left cheek (he was also believed to be a victim of the mustard gas used at Passchendaele, as he subsequently suffered from breathing problems and asthma). Little is known of Robert's war service, but he returned to New Zealand with a permanent brain injury caused by a piece of shrapnel that could not be removed. Neither man had any farming experience that my family is aware of.

The task of establishing their farms at Pukenamu must have been very daunting. In his memoirs, Ted Gawler said:

Most of their houses were shifted from somewhere else and were altered and added to. They had to build their cowsheds, and the metal for the concrete all came from the beach. These 100-acre lots had nothing on them, so they had to start from scratch. All the fence posts either came from the beach or trees buried on the farm. Despite the challenges, George, his wife and three children would eventually spend 18 years on the farm. After his health deteriorated, George was granted a war pension in 1936, and the family moved into the nearby township of Ötaki. Robert stayed on his farm until about 1946. He married in 1926 but did not have any children. A common concern regarding soldiers' settlement farms is that the settlers, having minimal capital behind them, carried large financial commitments. This does appear to have been the case at Pukenamu. My uncle has no doubt his parents were financially strapped.

"The milking shed was pretty basic. There was a petrol-driven engine to drive the separator and the vacuum pumps. We used to get 4-gallon tins of petrol delivered every now and then. You would cut down the tin and put a handle on it, and there was your bucket. You made do with what you had; you couldn't afford much. They (the farmers) all seemed to be a bit short of cash."



## The post-war settlers

The post-World War I soldier settlers are frequently referred to as having 'walked off' or abandoned their farms. The reasons include the poor quality of the land, their inexperience and often significant war injuries, and the high lease or mortgage costs they carried.

For those who didn't leave, lack of choice may have been a factor. Many would have found their war injuries a real impediment to getting other work. My uncle believes that is why his parents stayed on the farm for 18 years. Only when granddad's health deteriorated to the extent that he was eligible for a war pension did they leave.

However, quality of life is also an important part of the equation. The soldiers' settlement scheme enabled settlers to become farmers, make nature productive and build a family home.

Quality of life cannot usually be gleaned from government files. However, my uncle can provide some colourful insights from his childhood on the farm. It is fair to say he has fond memories.

"You always played cowboys and Indians, making bows and arrows kites. You got a willow stick criss-crossed, put string around it, and brown paper glued on to it. A big long piece of string, then out to the paddock, on a windy day and up (the kite) would go. We thought that was all right."

"The benzene petrol came in a wooden box which held two four-gallon tins. Occasionally, we found some old pram wheels and an axle and put them on the box, and that was our cart. We used to push each other halfway round the farm sometimes, over the paddocks and all. You sort of had to make your own fun."

My uncle's younger sister, Audrey, who died in 2017, had good memories of a different sort. In an email to a family member, she recorded the following:

"We enjoyed our meals – my mother was a good cook! We had Weetbix with real farm cream, toast and cocoa for breakfast. For school lunch, we had egg, cold meats, or lettuce and Marmite sandwiches, home-baked cookie or piece of cake, and an apple picked off our own apple trees.

"We all sat around the big table in the evening for our meal, a big hot meal with potatoes, vegetables from our father's garden, and delicious casseroles and stews, and always a dessert to follow."

My uncle also remembers a strong sense of camaraderie among the settler families. The children often played together, and the families got together

for weekend picnics. My grandfather spent time with his brother next door, listening to cricket and drinking beer, while my grandmother enjoyed frequent visits from her extended family living nearby. These and other memories point to a quality of life (especially for children) that money couldn't buy.

## Conclusion

Living in an isolated rural area on land of dubious quality, the Pukenumu settlers certainly faced their challenges. Many were inexperienced farmers hampered by significant war injuries, which sometimes gave them little choice but to stay.

Nevertheless, it appears they did what they could to establish productive lives for themselves, including marrying and bringing up families. Without their farms, it is difficult to know what sort of lives they might have had. The Pukenumu settlement may not quite have fitted Prime Minister William Massey's vision of New Zealand as an Arcadian landscape, but we should nonetheless give his government credit for its efforts to reintegrate into society a group of citizens who had served their country with commitment and courage; qualities that no doubt proved invaluable as they rebuilt their lives at Te Horo.



Me (centre) with Mum and Dad (Janice and Maurice) outside the old family home in 2022.