

Thomas WEBB 1865 to 1935

Thomas Webb was born at Henderson, Auckland on 29 April 1865. He was the first of twelve children born to Robert Webb, a half-caste Maori, and Mary Ann Glenn, the daughter of a Fencible soldier.

His father Robert was variously a sawyer, bushman, gold miner and contractor, who had been born on Waiheke Island in 1841. He married Mary Ann at Henderson's Mill in 1863 while working there as a millhand. Three years later, in 1867, the Thames Goldfields opened and Robert and Mary, together with Thomas and his younger brother James, joined the rush to Thames. Here the family lived until 1890, by which time Mary had had nine further children although, sadly two of the boys had died, one by drowning and the other of sunstroke. Their twelfth and last child was born at Mercury Bay (Whitianga) in 1891, but it was here also that their second son James died in 1892. Robert and Mary Ann remained at Mercury Bay until 1902, when they returned to Auckland.

It is not known how successful Robert was as a goldminer, but he did hold a Miners Right as early as August 1886. Perhaps his main employment was as a bushman, for in 1879 he was awarded a contract to supply Stones Shortland Sawmilling Co. with 30 million Feet of kauri over a 14 year period from the Kaueranga Valley around Billy Goat and Webbs Creek, in which venture he was joined by his younger brother Robert, recently returned from gold prospecting on the West Coast.

So this was the environment in which Thomas grew up. He would have received his schooling in Thames. His father would have been working in the bush for lengthy periods, perhaps returning home only on Sundays. As the eldest son, no doubt Thomas had to shoulder much of the responsibility for managing the household.

But apparently Thames held no fascination for Thomas, for by 1884 he was living in Northcote and working for the Chelsea Sugar Refining Co. In December of that year, at the age of only 19 he married Sarah Ellen McGregor, the daughter of a sergeant in the N.Z. Militia. Thomas and Sarah had five children; William Thomas, Violet Kate (who died young), Sarah Ellen (Nellie), Robert James (who also died young), and James McGregor. Sadly, Sarah died in December 1892 after the birth of the last of these children at the age of only 28.

Three and a half years later Thomas married for a second time. On 17 June 1896, at St. Pauls Church, Auckland, he married Evelyn Kate Etheridge, with whom he had a further five children; Evelyn Violet, Leonard Charles, Hazel Marion, Ivan Alfred and Francis Thomas (Frank).

Around the time of Thomas's second marriage the refinery introduced a system of employing its workers on a contract basis. Thomas became one of its contractors, handling the raw sugar. The ship loads of raw sugar arrived at the refinery's wharf in 2 cwt. sacks. These were conveyed on a horse drawn tramway to the raw sugar store, a large building with its ceiling about 12 metres above the floor. With the aid of hydraulics, the sacks could be flung more than 10 metres high to the top of the stack where they were carefully placed in position with a near vertical face. Later the stack would be "broken down" and the sacks conveyed, again by a horse drawn tramway, to the sugar mill, where the raw sugar would be melted and refined.

Thomas employed at least 10 men, including his brothers Robert and Frank and his brother James' son-in-law, Frank Harnden. In fact several more of the Webb family worked for the refinery, including Thomas' youngest brother Walter (Walter Richard) and his son Wally (Walter Robert), who were employed as lightermen, and his sons Will (William Thomas) and Jim (James McGregor) who began as an apprentice and rose to be their Design Engineer. In 1902 the employees took a case for higher wages to the Arbitration Court, workers in the Raw Sugar Store seeking a wage of £2 8/- a week. Thomas was one of those who gave evidence at the hearings.

In March 1904 there was a serious accident in the Raw Sugar Store. While the stack was being "broken down" there was a sudden collapse of part of the stack which buried four of the men. Just as these men were almost rescued there was a further collapse, resulting in six men being taken to Auckland Hospital, four with broken bones in addition to other injuries.

Thomas had already been warned by the factory manager that the work in the Raw Sugar Store was being carried out in an unsatisfactory manner, and his contract was suspended. However, the company did find other employment for Thomas at the refinery. Although one branch of the family tells that Thomas was sued and had to realise on everything he owned including his home, there is no evidence in the companies files of him being sued by the company. The injured men were all insured under a sickness and accident fund subsidised by the company.

Thomas was a member of the Masonic Lodge St. Andrews which met at Princes Street in the City. He was initiated in 1895 and installed as Master in 1903. There is a photograph of Thomas, taken about 1904 or perhaps a little later, in which he is dressed in his past-masters regalia and wearing his jewels. He cuts a dashing figure with his very dark hair and neatly trimmed beard.

He must have become dissatisfied with his situation at the sugar refinery for in 1905 we find him the licensee of the Pahi Hotel on the Kaipara Harbour. He remained here for two years when the hotel, which was owned by Hancock & Co., was virtually destroyed by fire. It was later completely rebuilt. During this time Thomas continued to be a lodge member, attending meetings at either Matakohē or Paparoa, but most likely the latter, the Lodge Franklin No. 2138 under the Grand Lodge of England constitution.

Hancock & Co. found another hotel for Thomas in 1907 at Mangonui, where he was the licensee until 1909. Here he was a member of the Mangonui Lodge until resigning in mid 1909.

In 1909 the family were on the move again, this time to the Central Hotel in Waihi. The Central was one of the better hotels in Waihi, constructed of kauri and with high quality furnishings. When the Ohinemuri Electorate was voted "dry" in the licensing polls of 1908 it became a boarding house (or private hotel) with 49 bedrooms. After being used to house 40 - 50 policemen during the miner's strike of 1912 it became unpopular with the miners and fell into decline. Slygrogging was rife in the Ohinemuri licensing area at this time. Subsequently, the Central was dismantled and moved to Rotorua. It was of such a size that it became two hotels, one half is now the major part of the Princes Gate Hotel, and the other half, which was reassembled into another hotel near the railway station burnt down not many years later.

In 1914 the family moved once more, this time back to Auckland where they lived at 18 Dublin Street, Ponsonby. Thomas resumed work as a contractor, although the type of work he did at that time is now unknown.

Finally, in 1917, Thomas returned to Waihi. He worked for a time as a miner while living at Wilson Street, before retiring to Silverton Road, where he was living when he died at the Waihi Hospital aged 70 years after a long illness. When his daughter Nellie died in 1922 at the age of only 32, the Honeybuns, Dick, Bill and Norma, lived with the Webb family. Three of Thomas' children, Evelyn, Hazel and Frank were also living at home at that time. After Thomas' death, his wife Evelyn moved back to Auckland, living first with Mrs. Lux in St. Marys Bay Road, Ponsonby and then in Middleton Road, Newmarket. Later she lived with various of her children but mostly with her youngest son, Frank, at 4 Westminster Road, Balmoral.

Thomas is reputed to have been a heavy drinker and a frequent "unlucky" gambler. It is said that Evelyn would have been left comfortably off were it not for this gambling. His grand daughter remembers that he once one the Tangiteroria Hotel in a card game. No doubt he soon lost it again. We do not know if Thomas owned either of the Waihi properties but it is suspected that he did not. In his will he left his estate and effects to his wife, Evelyn Kate, but these were assessed at "under £250". The only possessions of his which remain to-day are a gold pocket watch and chain and a small Masonic jewel (not one of those he was wearing in the photograph of him in his Masonic regalia) both of which are now in the possession of his grandson, Graeme Webb of Whangamata.