

The Pukekohe East Girl: A story by Evan Algie.

It was a long trek to Pukekohe East from down town Auckland in the year of 1855. To the nine year old Jemima Deerness, the journey by bullock wagon seemed to take forever, she probably asked her mother and father a hundred times “Are we there yet?” ## Her journey had already taken months. Beginning in the outposts of the Orkney Islands, across the stretch of wild water to the mainland of Scotland, from there down to Glasgow to board the sailing ship “Euphemia”. Months of shipboard life, at times frightening, at other times boring being confined below decks. All in all, an adventure never to be repeated. It was a one way trip to the ends of the earth.

Finally they arrived to a small house built for them in a clearing in the virgin bush. What a contrast to the bleak landscape of home where few trees struggle to grow in the windswept region. All around them now was this oppressive native forest, to a nine year old, inhabited by strange tattooed brown people who pulled out the curls of her hair and laughed as they sprang back into place. She was the first white girl in Pukekohe East.

The Deerness family very quickly made that house in the bush the social centre. The swagger or runaway sailor (so numerous in the country at that time) was always offered food and shelter. When the door was closed and the little family drawn around the fire, the latch would often be raised from outside and the door gently pushed open and in would creep a dozen or fifteen Maoris. They would sit around the fire and laugh and chatter among themselves. If the night was stormy, the thunder might drive a party of passing Maori to their door for shelter. As the thunder and lightning bounced about outdoors, the eyes and flashing teeth danced excitedly about in the lamp light indoors, as the small girl crouched against her mother’s knee and watched with great round eyes. All were welcome to their home. In the evening before the guests retired and in the morning before the swagger man took up his pack, Mr James Deerness would take down the great family Bible and read the evening and morning chapter. Then the family and visitors would bow the heads in prayer and he would commend them all to God, to the Lord and Father who had brought the small family so far.

On the Sabbath Day, the settlers would gather at the Deerness home for an afternoon service. Mr Deerness, with all a Scotsman’s love and reverence for the House of God, felt there should be a place in the district dedicated to God for Worship. So as his father had done so in Orkney, he too gave a portion of his land for a Church and Churchyard. On this site, in November 1861 a temporary building was erected of timber slabs. In 1863 his son, John, built the first church of that district. A church that is still standing today. Not long after this the people of Pukekohe felt the first effects of the Maori war. The Deerness family with the other settlers had to flee from their homes to places of safety. James Deerness and his family did not return to Pukekohe after the war. The Church he helped establish, provided the community with not only a place of worship but a common meeting place for all activities in the district and for 17 years a place of education.

Jemima later married Alexander Algie and settled in another outpost at **Mullet Point, near Warkworth**. Hospitality, which had been such a feature in her father’s home, was just as prominent in her own.

Sequel

What happened to the Pukekohe East Girl?

The little 9 year old lass that had fascinated the Maori people of the Pukekohe region with her fair complexion and tight curls, had grown into a stunning young lady of 19.

A Glaswegian who had made her acquaintance had acquired some land up in the north came knocking on her door with a request of marriage.

It turns out that this young lad of 27 had been walking down Queen Street in her town of Auckland, when a January rain squall came over and he sought shelter in a corrugated iron shed. There was a land auction going on in there and he became fascinated by the auctioneer. There are two legends. One has it that he happened to scratch his ear while looking at the auctioneer and the man thought Alexander Algie was making his bid. Before he knew it the land was “knocked” down to him. The other legend is that Alex, loved

a practical joke, this poor auctioneer wasn't getting much response on this land up north so Alex put in a bid thinking he would run it up and before it got too serious he would slip back out into the street. Little did he know that was the last bid and the land was "sold" to him. He asked the clerk, "Where is this land I have apparently bought, the clerk didn't have a clue and suggested that he go down to the wharves and find a skipper of a coastal ship that knew the north. In those days the skippers of the ships were the information sources. Sure enough he found a boat going to that region, the skipper said I'll put you off on the rocks and leave you there to have a good look around then when I come back from my deliveries up at Matakana, I'll collect you. So Alex discovered his purchase was a fine piece of coast land with a fertile flat near the shore. He thought here would clear the land and go farming. All he lacked was a wife. So back to Auckland and back to Jemima, the young lady he had previously met. He asked her to marry him and she agreed. They then left Auckland to take up their residence at Mullet Point, North Auckland. For many years Mrs Algie was a great help in the church life of the Warkworth and Mahurangi district. The hospitality which had been such a feature in her father's home was just as prominent in her own; Her family was brought up to know that every passing traveller was to be entertained. It was said of her that whenever a gum digger came in sight she would say to her daughters: " Girls, there is an old man on the beach with a heavy load. I am sure he is tired. Is the kettle boiling? "

Life was not easy in those early days on a seaside farm with a large family. It meant hardship, long hours, and self-sacrifice. At times it seemed as though they never could earn their living from that hard, barren land, but she never lost her faith in God the Father. Indeed with increased adversity she learned to lean more fully upon Him, and her faith widened and deepened. When the Sabbath (as she loved to call it) came she, her husband, and as many of the family as possible would walk the three miles through stiff mud or over dusty roads to worship at the little Mahurangi Church, where the service was led by the Rev. Robert McKinney. To any guest in her home on the Sabbath Mrs Algie always gave an invitation to go with them to worship, and she gave it with her charming smile. A smile which would lighten her whole face, a smile which was but the reflection of the glory within.

All who had talked with her knew the depth of her reading. She read as one who loved it eager for the knowledge, the volume held in the gentle hands of the true book-lover. Some people when they read take only a word at a time, others with much practice are able to comprehend a phrase or even a line at each glance, but Mrs Algie seemed to grasp the meaning in paragraphs or almost pages.

With her husband she began, what we would call today an Industry in Tourism & Hospitality. A boarding house was established on the shores of their seaside property, later to be named after them, Algies Bay. Clients came by ship and were rowed ashore. There were no roads from Auckland in those days. For 115 years descendants of her family have operated accommodation facilities for tourist from the world over at this same location.