



## **Jack Phillips Trip North**

Courtesy Christine Clement

Jack Phillips was born at Sherry River, Nelson, the son of William Henry and Hannah Phillips nee Hunt. William Henry Phillips was born in Cornwall in 1845 and came to New Zealand from the Bendigo gold fields, Victoria in 1861. He was at the Gabriel's Gully gold rush for a short time before moving to Nelson being one of the earliest gold diggers at the Wakamarina field. In 1862 he went to Tadmor and found gold in payable quantities at Sherry (Tadmor Hill). William Henry Phillips eventually sold his claim there and took up farming in the Sherry district which takes its name from the colour of the water in the river.

Jack Phillips attended Nelson College but by 1907 he and a Bill Muir were working for George Mends in the Palmerston North area, flax milling. Samuel Henry (Harry) Palmer, who was in business with George Mends had sold his farm at Fitzherbert, Palmerston North and needed a hand to bring his farm equipment to Paengaroa where the partners were to set up again in the flax milling business. Harry Palmer and Jack Phillips departed in June 1907 from the farm at Fitzherbert with three good horses in the dray, the shaffer being an old town horse, very staunch and nearly as big as an elephant but slow. Jack was interviewed by the Bay of Plenty Times in 1967 on his journey to Paengaroa.

"Harry had a very nice gig which was tied to the axle of the dray and Jack rode a mare, driving seven or eight young horses before him. The cavalcade stayed at Fielding the first night following a good start. The second day they reached Cheltenham and stayed in shearing quarters at the "Waituna Run" owned by the Williamson's. The next day the party made the main road (Now State Highway One) running up from Hunterville at what was known as Vinegar Hill bridge. During the day Jack met up with an old chap called Jobson and they boiled a billy together. The old chap sold Jack a dog which fought at every opportunity with the one he had brought from Sherry River. The fourth day the party made Mangaweka, still plodding along and the fifth day they camped just north of Taihape. The sixth day was wasted as the party followed the road to the Public Works station at Mataroa – and had to return. At this time the Public

Works section ran from Mataroa to Ohakune. The Main Trunk line was not then connected but there was a railway station. An accommodation house was kept by the Peterson's. From this point the party started on what was then known as the desert (the Rangipo Desert or Desert Road). The plains were not as they are today, said Jack. In 1907 the tussock was tall and hundreds of wild horses grazed. They would come right down to the track – it could hardly be called a road. The two men had a job keeping the young horses from joining the bands of wild horses and here the two dogs came in handy. Among the hundreds of horses on the tussock plains chestnuts seemed to predominate.

Reflecting on that portion of the journey Jack said the sight of so many horses was something that is not seen today. It took two days to cross the desert. The eighth day the party struck a blizzard all day and although both were clad in thick warm ponchos the cold and wet seemed to drive through to the skin. June on the desert was intensely cold. That night the rain stopped and they pitched tent alongside coaching stables – a large corrugated iron shed which was occupied by the stableman and his wife. Just how they kept themselves warm without any heating I don't know. In the moonlight we gathered a large amount of dry ti-tree, got a fire going, and hung our clothes on a big frame to dry and then turned in for the night taking turns to keep the fire going. Fortunately our clothes dried out fairly well. The ninth day took the party almost to Lake Taupo. Again a blizzard raged all day and through the blizzard wild horses roamed. Each stallion had its own mob of mares. The party had also crossed several swift streams swollen by the snow. The only person they met on the road was a man in a light wagon carting flax to the rail at Waiouru. He had about a ton load which would gross him £5. It took him two days to cover forty four miles. The 10th day the party reached the lake at the bridge now known as Turangi. There was no settlement there, and as they had become very low in stores, Harry decided to take the saddle mare and the gig to Tokaanu, about four miles off the road. Jack received instructions to carry on with the dray and horses and having driven the young horses across he tackled the bridge with a span washed clean out by floods. The grade was steep and slippery and there were no side rails. He took the leaders from the dray and tied them up on the other side. He then led the heavy shaft horse on to the down grade. One wheel came around too soon and Jack nearly put the horse over a twenty foot drop. Jack said that it was not until he propped the dray and got the horse out that he found a railway iron sticking up high above the bridge, which had caught the dray frame and held it. On Harry's return they let the dray down slowly with a big rope on the axle.

That night we stayed at a flaxmill and learned that the flaxmill dray of three horses had gone over the bridge just a week before, the horses all being killed. On the 11th day we camped along the lake shore. On the 12th day we reached Taupo and camped a little beyond the lake. Continuing on our journey toward Paengaroa, we reached a timber milling place called Oranui, where an old Maori told us not to drink the water, or allow our horses to. One horse beat us to the water and in two days collapsed on the road. "It was no use afterwards". At another creek the young horses broke back on them before they could rope them. Jack taking the saddle mare found them three miles away heading back to Palmerston North. Jack describes a winter morning with the dogs white with frost and on the camp site on the old Atiamuri road the tents standing without guy ropes. The Wairakei road was not through to Taupo in those days. On the 15th day the party was camped at the old mission station at Te Ngae (on the shores of Lake Rotorua) where there was a Maori school. There was no settlement along the lake in those

days. We hoped to make Paengaroa the next day – there was a long haul but at dark we were still on the road. Mr Edward Matthews, who we met on the road, suggested that we paddock down for the night on his property, this most generous being accepted readily by us. We were actually at Paengaroa as we found out the next morning when we collected the horses”.

In 1908 Jack Phillips bought the 426 acre partly developed farm of Peter Wright on Lower Maniatutu Road, Pongakawa and he farmed there until his retirement in 1956. Jack and Agnes then moved to Jellicoe Street, Te Puke. He was known for his great love of poetry and was a keen bowler. Jack served on the Pongakawa Domain Board from 1910 until 1952 and was secretary for 23 years of these. For fourteen years he was a member of the Pongakawa School Committee, being chairman from 1929-1933. Jack and Agnes are buried together at the Old Te Puke Cemetery. A sister of Jack Phillips, Helen married Trevor Arthur Usborne Benner in Te Puke in 1914.

*Sources: Lorna Benseman (Te Puke), The Cyclopedia of New Zealand: Industrial, descriptive, Historical, Biographical: Facts, Figures, Illustrations, (Wellington, Cyclopedia Co., 1897-1908) – Marlborough and Nelson – Sherry, Te Puke Times*