

A generous gift 'to the people of New Zealand'

In 1977, Bernard and Dorothy Wells and their daughters Sandra and Linley gifted 4ha (10 acres) of their family land to "the people of New Zealand" with the intention that it should be a new "natural heritage" park in Mapua.

The gift of what was to be called Aranui Park was part of a long Wells family tradition of community service and generosity and it came after Bernard and wife Dorothy had gone into retirement following a lifetime of apple growing. It was both a generous gesture and quite a sacrifice, because the Wells were never a wealthy family.

While Bernard and Dorothy's family enjoyed orcharding, even though it was never very profitable for them. Bernard and his brother Stan had inherited their orchards from their parents, Arnold and Lizzie Wells, and the family land had been really sufficient to support only one family during Arnold's time. When both sons, Bernard and his brother Stan, took over the orcharding operation in the 1940s, apples provided only a modest income for each of the two families.

In their retirement years, Bernard and Dorothy could see that the population of Mapua was likely to grow rapidly and their vision was to create a park in central Mapua that could be both used for recreation and to showcase the original native vegetation. Bernard was especially keen to grow kahikatea (white pine) which had once dominated a huge wetland forest in Seaton Valley but the trees had been felled to make way for pastoral farming.

At the time of the gift, Bernard had given years of service to the then Mapua Domain Board. He initially thought of donating the Wells' low-lying land to the then Waimea County Council. However, after making inquiries, he found that he could not stop a future council from changing the use of the land, abandoning his vision of a community park and selling the land for housing.

Because of those Bernard's doubts, the family donated the land not to the local council, but to the Crown, to "the people of New Zealand". While the gift was gratefully received by then Minister of Lands Venn Young with a certificate presented to the Wells family acknowledging "a generous contribution to the preservation of New Zealand's natural heritage", only 12 years later the Government undertook major restructuring. Its Lands and Survey Department was abolished and administration of Aranui Park was handed over to very council that Bernard had earlier decided might not prove a reliable custodian.

The gift to a wider community was consistent with Bernard's work on Mapua's Domain Board and Reserves Advisory Board for more than 40 years and also his family's efforts to encourage better reserves in the district. It was also part of a family tradition of such gifts. In Mapua, Bernard's father Arnold had donated the site for the Mapua Presbyterian Church (now a part of the Hills Community Church), and in Taranaki, his grandfather, Zaccheus, had donated one portion of his land for a school and another for a historic Methodist chapel.

Bernard had arrived in Mapua in 1915 as an infant with three older brothers, Howard, Malcolm, and Stan, after their parents, Arnold and Lizzie, had quit their leased Taranaki dairy farm. The family later had a further addition, daughter Beatrice, or Trixie, who was born in 1918. Arnold, then aged 42, had grown weary of the monotony and hardship of milking cows in Taranaki's tempestuous and wet weather.

He was son number six in a family of 10 sons and he inherited from his father Zaccheus some distinctive traits, including a strong Methodist faith in the Lord, a belief in hard work, meticulous record-keeping, a love of music and a thirst for learning that, in his case, led to an interest in astronomy, meteorology and botany.

Arnold bought 20 acres of land in Mapua, half flat, swampy land (mostly now Aranui Park), and half the lower slopes of the hill close to Seaton Valley Rd, partly planted in young apple trees. Arnold optimistically named his orchard "Mt Hope", because it was said that on a clear day from his front verandah he could see distant Mt Taranaki.

Arnold grazed milking cows on the flat part of his property and on the sloping ground he had to plant more trees to make a viable orchard. The skeleton of a farm shed that survives in the centre of Aranui Park used to be Arnold's old milking shed and neighbour Ness Beere recalls hearing him singing hearty versions of popular hymns as he hand-milked his small herd of cows. One hymn later recalled was "Nearer My God to Thee". The family relied on their own large garden for vegetables and, of course, grew a range of fruits in addition to the apples they harvested.

Within a year of arriving in Mapua, Arnold was on the committee of the local Presbyterian Church, which also served Baptists and Methodists, and within four years the couple donated a section in Aranui Rd for a new church. The building, completed in 1928, later changed to become the Uniting Church and, subsequently, the Hills Community Church. The church has been deconsecrated now but continues to serve as a church and community hall and hosts a Coffee and Kids programme for mothers and children.

As a hobby, Arnold planted native trees, many of which he collected as seedlings. He was also a long-serving member of the Domain Board and for recreation made occasional trips into the Mt Arthur area in search of ferns and native plants. Some of the the native trees Arnold planted can still be seen above the western boundary of Aranui Park, including rimu, matai and and a giant tañekaha.

Both Arnold and Lizzie were lay preachers and Arnold used to walk as far as Dovedale and Upper Moutere and back to Mapua to lead Sunday services.

Arnold and Lizzie were music lovers and used to perform at regular Friday family musical evenings. It was a tradition carried on by their children, and Bernard on violin and Stan on cello would perform with others at similar family musical evenings for much of their lives.

In the Mapua district, the apple trade gained rapid momentum during the 1920s, particularly with the development of the Mapua Wharf. After a bumper season in 1929, Arnold persuaded his brother and tenth son of the Wells family, Decie (Decimus), and family to come south and to share the good fortunes of orcharding.

Unfortunately, in 1930 apple prices crashed as orcharding and the economy headed into the Great Depression. Arnold and Decie's families survived the hard times only by dint of the Wells' characteristics of faith and hard work.

During the 1930s, Bernard and his brothers became involved in a growing debate in the churches about war and pacifism. In 1935, a Christian Pacifist Society was formed and spirited national debate on the issue continued till after the outbreak of World War II. The Wells family, like many, was split on the question. When conscription was introduced in 1940, Bernard and Stan, as conscientious objectors, lodged appeals against

the call-up. However, their brothers, Malcolm and Howard, were keen to serve and were subsequently active in the Home Guard.

Another person in Mapua caught up in the same debate was a young aspiring artist who worked on the Wells brothers' orchards on and off for a period of nearly 20 years, the young artist Toss Woollaston. He had initially worked on the orchard for a season, fell in love with the area, and subsequently brought back his bride Edith to live in Mapua. Another famous painter who worked on the Wells orchard was the young Colin McCahon, who came all the way from his Dunedin home to Nelson by cycle to work on the Wells orchard. Both artists were involved in debates about religion and pacifism in the years leading up to World War 2, and McCahon's questioning approach to Christianity had a profound effect on his later work

Toss Woollaston had successfully applied for exemption from military training by writing a ringing declaration of his pacifist beliefs and he subsequently avoided conscription. Bernard and Stan were not so lucky, their appeals against service were disallowed although Stan was permitted to work the family orchard and also one belonging to a neighbour. Bernard, however, was one of 800 conscientious objectors who were punished harshly for their views. He was sentenced to three months' jail in Mt Crawford prison, followed by detention for the duration of the war in a remote prison camp near Hawera. His home during the war years was a small military hut and he was mainly occupied clearing scrub and flax.

One consolation was that he found time to read and he was also stimulated by the discussions with interesting fellow prisoners. Another consolation was that he was able to write to a young teacher from Picton he had met through his church and musical activities, Dorothy Duffett. Bernard courted her by letter and later, when camp rules were relaxed, she was able to visit him.

After the war, Bernard and Dorothy married and returned to Mapua where Bernard introduced his bride to orchard life. The apple workers they employed, if not locals, were accommodated in the family home and treated as family. Many later became lifelong friends. Twice a day all through the apple seasons Dorothy baked and carried morning and afternoon teas out into the orchard to the pickers or pruners.

Dorothy, a talented singer, also contributed to the Wells musical evenings. Like Bernard, she was strongly involved in the community, including serving as a Playcentre supervisor and then one of Mapua's longest-serving volunteer librarians. The library she worked so hard for, based on the back of the Mapua Hall, was later rewarded by a very generous Trust Canterbury (now the Rātā Foundation), which enabled the building of a modern, purpose-built community library. Up to the present, our community library remains in the same building, independent and staffed by volunteers.

Like other conscientious objectors returning home after the war, Bernard and Stan were not accepted well by the community. It was many years before some would talk to them, one or two never did speak to them again. At an anti-conscription rally in Nelson both were attacked and had their heads pushed into a toilet. Although many residents gradually came to understand their views and value their contribution to the community, Bernard felt that his views prevented him ever working in any job that was not orcharding.

After the war, Bernard became a strong supporter of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and through the Nelson Action Committee on International Affairs, he was also involved in the anti-Vietnam war movement and opposition to the 1981

Springbok tour. In the 1970s, he joined a group that helped stop redevelopment of Mapua's Fruitgrowers' Chemical Company plant, eventually leading to its closure.

Bernard carried on the threads of community work initiated by his grandfather and father. He was a lay preacher at the church and also played the organ. He ran the Sunday School served on the school committee and was also secretary-treasurer of the Progress League, a fore-runner of the Mapua community association. It was perhaps that role which encouraged him to begin publishing a monthly news-sheet, the *Mapua News*.

Bernard acted as reporter, editor, sometime typist, printer and distributor. In character, the *Mapua News* was similar to today's *Coastal News*, but it was all painfully hand typed on to a waxed stencil sheet and then put through an old Gestetner printer, now happily a museum piece.

In another final tribute to the Mapua district he loved, Bernard spent much of his retirement researching a history of Mapua, the *Fruits of Labour*, which he published in 1990. Its 400 pages meticulously record the development of the district

Bernard died on 27 February 1994 aged 78. He was survived by Dorothy and their daughters, Sandra (Jacobs) and Linley (Eade) who supported efforts to protect the family's original vision for their very significant gift to Mapua, Aranui Park. Dorothy died in 2012 in Auckland and both Sandra and Linley live in the North Island, Sandra in Auckland and Linley in Wellington.

The author gratefully acknowledges information from the Wells family history and from family members.

-David Mitchell