The Hut Maker

By Chris Mclean

So you want to know about the huts? Well, you’ve come to the right person. In that book of his, *Crusader Fox King*, Ian Mackersey called me Taranui but my name’s really Joe, Joe Gibbs.

Writers like to disguise people and places, don’t they? Make them different. Fair enough. But I drew the line at being called a sheep stealer. For seventy years, I lived off the bush, venison mostly but once in a while a possum stew, too. I’d tell the trampers that it was deer and half the time they believed me! Never stolen a sheep, though.

I didn’t know Mackersey. They say he was one of the young ones who came to the hut during the war. I don’t recall him, yet now his story is what people believe…

I first saw these hills from the top of a tree, a tall rimu above the Tauherenikau that I climbed for a better view. I once had a garden there, with fruit trees and veges, until the bloody possums got into the enclosure. But I still loved living there, so unlike working on the wharves.

No one found it easy up there. They learnt early on what the tops could do, when Harold Freeman died, back in 1922. The papers blamed it on the war, said it had weakened his heart, but that was only part of the story. They should’ve turned back, it was crazy to push on. Maybe if Fred Vosseler, from the Tararua Tramping Club, had been with them, they would’ve gone back. Who knows?

But when Kime died, well, it was clear that the hills could kill. I was one of the searchers. We found him after five days, a bundle of khaki in the tussock. Fred saw him first, and gave him a tot from his flask. Then we carried him back to Alpha hut, put him by the fire, gave him some whisky. Kime’s face went red, then suddenly pale. Just a small sigh, as he slipped away. Esmond was his first name, but I only found that out after he died.

Once you might say was bad luck. But twice in two years? Fred was furious. Took it personally, felt the whole sorry business gave his club a bad name.

But mostly people’s thoughts turned to shelter, huts. Somewhere safe, out of the weather. Somewhere to get warm.

The Tararua club built one up on Hector. Pukemoumou, the hill of desolation, the Maoris called it. People called it a dogbox, but it was better than that. Flagstones on the floor and a door that shut snugly. No window, though. Then they planted pines around it, for firewood, they said. I could’ve told them they wouldn’t survive. Nothing survives up there. After a few years, even the dogbox blew away.

It was in 1923 that me and Jack Fisk got going on a hut just below Table Top. It was Willie Field, the MP, who got the government to stump up money. Put in his own money too, a hundred pounds.

We had horses to help with the loads. Loved them like women. Gave them names, stroked them and dressed their hooves after a tough trip up from the Otaki Forks. Jack and me, we cut the timber from the bush. Then we sawed the logs into lengths, using the pit saw we made. Now that was something, especially if you were the one down in the pit, with sawdust in your eyes all the time. We took turns down there.

Jack was the best sawyer I ever worked with. He got that blade moving so sweetly sometimes. Together we could cut timber faster than anyone. Then we clad the framing with corrugated iron carried up by the horses, strapped to their saddles. We laid lines of logs in the mud holes to make it easier for the mares, but the water always won.

The city slickers loved coming up that track, though. They didn’t mind the mud. On Friday nights some even headed up by torchlight, keen to make the most of the weekend. Boys and girls, fresh and eager. Like my niece Gladys. She’s the closest to a daughter that I’ve got. Good with horses, is Gladys. Older men and women too, office workers. I’d sometimes see them eating their lunch down on the wharves. But in the hills they looked different.

Then, a few years later, my greatest feat. They called the hut Kime, because his father gave Fred fifty quid. And a Bible. Everything came up on the horses. The summer before they’d plodded across the top of the South Island, taking tourists from Tophouse down to the West Coast. Gladys brought them over on the ferry from Nelson. And her brother Ralph came too, now that Jack had gone.

It was hot that summer. We were lucky. Sometimes summer doesn’t come at all up here. Young Wally Neill got it all on his new camera. He was a bloody marvel, that kid. Said he grew up in a tent, but I didn’t believe him until he showed me a photo. His parents let him pitch a tent up the back of their section. He lived there for more than ten years. Finally, Fred let him join the club, even though he was still too young. Then the kid was away!

He rubbed shoulders with the best – Bill Davidson, Jim Butcher, Les Adkin and Norm Elder. But Norm was the only one to get a hut named after him. I never figured out if they did that because of his map – it was the first one of the ranges – or the silly scarf he wore wrapped round his head. Looked like an old woman. But nobody seemed to care and they all listened carefully when he took out his pipe and talked.

Norm’s knowledge came from books. Mine came from the bush. My real classroom, you could say, was in the hills, while his was in a university, in Wellington. We still meet sometimes on the street. It feels strange, a bit awkward actually, and yet here in the hills, we share a cuppa and a smoke like brothers.

The next hut I built for them was my third, or if we count extending Alpha hut, my fourth. ‘My last hurrah’, Fred used to call it. A two-storey beauty beside the Tauherenikau. In my valley. I wasn’t keen this time, but Fred was all for it. A clubhouse in the hills, he reckoned. Can’t argue with that. Mid-winter parties and barn dances, though I’d often slip away to my secret campsite up Canyon Creek. One of the young fellas, the one who worked in the Tax Department, told me Tauherenikau meant ‘house made of nikau’. He said Hau called it that, the ancestor who named all the rivers down this way. Hau’s house.

I made Hau’s house my home. Lots of people came to visit, but Frank was my favourite. Thoughtful and gentle, never wanted to kill anything. Frank looked out for me, even wrote about me in the paper, but he told the truth, unlike Mackersey. Even after that pretty English girl caught Frank’s attention, he still kept an eye on me. After they got married, I sometimes went out to their place at Days Bay for Sunday lunch. A long walk for a roast, but the closest I got to having a family.

That’s just the way it worked out. Not sure why. They said I bagged so many deer because I could think like one. But women? Comes a time you realise it’s not going to happen. Could never work them out. Sometimes it’s lonely out here on my own. I think of what might’ve been. A son or a daughter, maybe both. But what would their world be like?

A week ago, two youngsters came to see me, asking me about the future. I can’t even think of the future, while the past is so fresh in my mind. Perhaps the two aren’t so different, though I didn’t tell them that.

That was one thing Mackersey got right about me in his book – the hunting bits were spot on. He must’ve done a bit himself, to write like that. But it’s huts, not hunting, you want to know about…

Twenty years after *Crusader Fox King* was published in England, the Sinclair brothers, Bill, Bob and Jim, built another Tararua hut, up on Kapakapanui. They loved to hunt up there. But Bob always said avoid it in the roar, when strangers came with their guns and their dangerous ways. Hunters built it, in a clearing blasted out with dynamite.

Six months after they hit the last nail, the Sinclair brothers disappeared at sea. Vanished, fishing beyond Kapiti. No debris, no flotsam. Nothing left but their hut, a headstone in the hills. Fifty years later, the Sinclair kids built a memorial seat down by the estuary, halfway between the mountains and the island. Smooth macrocarpa, with a back rail carved in the shape of Kapiti.

I remember visiting Fred in hospital. Covered in bruises from falling out of his bed.

This old guy who taught so many how to live in the hills, once climbed Cook himself, couldn’t even get back under his sheets.

I wish I hadn’t gone. Wish I’d kept Fred strong in my mind, as a mountain man, instead.

I sit on the Sinclairs’ seat looking out to the island. Norm likened it to a sleeping crocodile, only, in his typical way, he called it a ‘slumbering Leviathan’. Behind me, the hills beckon. What I wouldn’t give toto get back there, just for a few days in the old hut.

*By Chris Maclean with thanks to Shaun Barnett, Jan FitzGerald and Alan Wehipeihana for their crucial contributions.*

FURTHER READING

Shaun Barnett and Chris Maclean, *Leading the Way – 100 Years of the Tararua Tramping Club*, Tararua Tramping Club and Potton & Burton, Nelson, 2019.

Ian Mackersey, *Crusader Fox King*, Robert Hale Ltd, London, 1955.

Chris Maclean, *Tararua – the story of a mountain range*, Whitcombe Press, Wellington, 1994.