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# MEMORIAL ADDRESS

## THE MATTHEWS OF WAIRONGOMAI.

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THE story of Wairongomai starts in 1850 when Charles Matthews purchased the "Wharepapa" run situated at the Southern end of the Western Lake and continuing South to the Eglinton property "Wharekauhau." This land was partly flat and part hill for the Western Boundary extended some distance up the face of the range. Originally covered by scrub, fern and flax a small area had been cleared when Matthews bought and the only stock was a few Merino sheep and some cattle. These lived in the bush during rough weather and increasing rapidly, the latter became, at a later date, a source of considerable revenue. In 1855, an adjoining property very little improved, was bought from a Mr. Allsop. Developmental work had been going on though slowly and when the property taken up by Mr. Burling came on the market it was also bought by Matthews. This made his holding, a long narrow strip bounded on the east by the Lake, on the south by Palliser Bay, and on the west by the Rimutaka range, a continuous one of 20,000 acres.

Of this area, the mountain sides were quite useless for pastoral purposes and though bush was felled on the lower slopes, the area reverted to native growth of varying kinds. Very little of the property could be classed as good land and by far the greatest part was definitely poor and along the foot of the hills was very stony. Streams ran from the hills and provided a plentiful water supply, but unfortunately this satisfactory condition was altered by earthquakes, first in 1855 and later by those of the present century.

The work of pioneers was always arduous and in the case of the Matthews difficulties were accentuated by the lack of communications and general transport. The trip to Wellington, though only 40 miles, took four days, travellers having to wait at different places along the coast for the tide to recede in order to get around several cliff faces. The effect of the 1855 earthquake must have been profound for Matthews has recorded that at one particular place where difficult rocks had to be negotiated these were left high and dry and that where the sea at low tide reached the sheer mountain side there was a strip of dry land several chains wide. This change has also been recorded in the writings of William Colenso.

An illustration of the difficulties of transport can be given in the fact that wool had to be ferried by whaleboat from the Wharepapa shore to a ship lying off the coast. Bullock drays were taken out into the surf sufficiently far to enable the whaleboats to be loaded. As settlement on the Eastern side of the lake increased boats were used to take the wool down the lake and through the outlet to the waiting ship.

Clearing scrub, etc., proceeded and some land was ploughed and sown to English grasses, and an effort made to bring in the lower mountain slopes. This work was abandoned and the cut-over areas have so regenerated that it is now difficult to pick out the line which marked the edge of the clearing. There is no record of the grass mixtures sown, but there seems little doubt that brown top and possibly some sweet vernal were included in the mixture.

Much trouble was experienced in getting rid of manuka and tawhini which came in strongly after the original growth had been cut and burned, and for years pulling the young plants of these was the routine winter job and it was not until topdressing was introduced that any marked control was obtained. Since that time there has been no trouble with either plant other than in odd corners where the topdresser could not go.

When Wharepapa was acquired settlers in the district grew their own wheat, potatoes, etc., and the first crops at Wharepapa were grown on ground recently cut and burned, and the seed was worked into the soil with hoes. The crop was cut with sickle or scythe, threshed with a flail and the grain ground by hand.

When Alfred was 17 his father placed him in complete charge of the whole property and the homestead and outbuildings were established on their present site, on both sides of Waiorongomai River. Later Alfred inherited the whole property which was subsequently divided between his sons, Norman taking "Wharepapa," Harold "Papatahi" and eventually the balance, "Waiorongomai" passed to R.W. in 1924.

When R.W. took over, the area of "Waiorongomai" was 7,500 acres, of which not more than 3,500 acres could be classed as productive, the balance being mountain side, lake and areas which were flooded when the lake rose. He set to work with plough, high quality seed, lime and fertiliser and by trial and error found which suited the country best. His success has completely changed the appearance of the property for what was once an area growing an indifferent pasture now carries a good sward with a very high clover content and good carrying capacity. An indication of the change brought about is shown by the cattle figures—before topdressing and liming became standard practice, the cattle stock was 80 breeding cows and 250/300 bullocks; at the present time 130 cows are run and during the spring flush 1700/1800 bullocks of which 1200 are fattened. The greatest number fattened in one year was 1400. Sheep have been increased only slightly from 1300 ewes with their progeny to 1600 plus hoggets.

Subterranean clover has played an important part in pasture improvement. This clover was found first as a volunteer in a paddock near the homestead, and as it did well and spread, the Department of Agriculture was called upon to name it and since that time it has been highly regarded, being now sown in all paddocks at the rate of 2lb. per acre, Tallarook and Mt. Barker being used. In the early days bidi bidi was troublesome but it has disappeared due to denser swards, heavier stocking with cattle and the unseen work of the aphids.

The country along the lakeside was higher than that immediately behind it (owing to a progressive siltation from the lake) giving a naturally wet basin. This wetness was accentuated by numerous springs and 30 miles of open drains were cut. Before the higher country was improved the ram hoggets were run on this area as it was the only part of the station growing decent grass. In spite of constant attention rams got into the drains and were drowned. Now the rams are run on the higher ground and the low part is fenced off and used for cattle in the dry period.

The early sheep stock was Merino of rather indifferent quality. These sheep ran on unfenced land and became very wild, many penetrating some distance into the standing bush where they bred, thus bringing about a deterioration in the general flock. The wool clip was not good, being poor in character and light, and there was also some foot trouble. Matthews decided to cross Cotswolds and Romney on the

original stock but the former was not a success. However, he continued to use Romney rams until all signs of Merino characteristics had been eliminated.

The number of rams required annually must have been considerable, as at this time the whole property was run as one unit. It may have been that the idea of breeding his own rams caused Matthews to entertain the idea of starting a purebred flock. He did this in 1875 by the purchase from J. & H. Barber of 83 ewes and lambs which had come from Mr. A. Ludlam, of the Hutt, who had imported Romneys in the 60's.

When these sheep arrived at Waiorongomai they were put into a paddock known as Burlings, as it was about the best grassed on the station. Unfortunately some stray dogs got amongst them and killed 12 ewes. In the following year a further 156 ewes and lambs were purchased from Barber Bros., of which a number were from imported parents and the best of them were selected to mate with a ram called "Bismarck," which had been imported by Ludlam. A son of this ram was also acquired.

No additions were made until 1880 when two rams of pure imported parentage were bought from E. J. Riddiford. One of these proved a successful sire in improving wool quality and weight in his progeny. A number of additions, all from imported stock were made in the ensuing years and in 1894, Mr. Chas. Elgar, then in England, selected for "Waiorongomai" 16 ewes and 9 rams. The ewes were bred by J. S. S. Goodwin and were a good lot. Though mated with top rams none produced a ram good enough for use in the stud, but fortunately their female progeny were better and bred on and became a valuable addition to the ewe flock.

The rams were bred by Neam, Rigden, File and Wightich, and the sheep from the latter breeder was an outstanding individual and one which gave promise of being a valuable sire. Unfortunately a few days after being joined with the ewes, he received a cut on his leg from barbed wire which turned septic and the ram died. In 1901 two rams from J. S. S. Goodwin were imported and these proved good breeders.

The flock had been steadily improving and by this time contained many good animals, but had not produced anything which satisfied the critical eye of the breeder who was always on the lookout for a ram to raise the standard still higher. By a fortunate chance he was asked to judge Romneys at the Manawatu Show, where the late Mr. G. C. Wheeler was exhibiting two rams which he had recently imported. Matthews took a great fancy to one of these, a two-tooth, and he asked for first refusal should the sheep at any time be for sale. Shortly after Mr. Wheeler wrote to say the ram was for sale and in due course Westbroke No. 1 arrived at Waiorongomai. The purchase of this ram had a great influence not only on the Waio flock but on N.Z. Romneys in general.

Matthews was too ill to arrange the first matings of this ram, but selected all his later mates and he used to say that Westbroke No. 1 never bred a bad lamb. This sheep is the real foundation sire of the flock and to-day every ewe traces directly to him and the leading sires have the old sheep's blood concentrated in their breeding. The following shows the direct line of leading sires used at Waio since 1903, ending with the top 2-tooth of the present year.

## LINE OF DESCENT

	292.48 (Top Waio 2 tooth. 1950.)
	A39.43
	102.40
	405.34
	255.32
	355.27
	507.24
	4.21
Ajax	400.17
President II	262.15
Premier	267.13
Premier	I
	188.04

Westbrooke No. 1.

Fig. I. Line of descent from Westbrooke No. 1.

A brief description of No. 1 may be of interest.

**Head:** Modern in every respect.

**Bone:** Heavy but cannon rather long.

**Back line:** Straight with wonderfully level carry out. Great fleshing along the back.

**Rib:** Rather flat.

**Wool:** Bright and soft handling. Lock rather small and fleece a little too open.

**Carriage:** Excellent. Commanding outlook with excellent stance and movement.

In 1903 Mr. Matthews went to England for health reasons and naturally availed himself of the opportunity of seeing the Romney on its native marshes, and as a result of the visit five rams were selected from the leading flocks. Though these were good sheep they were not outstanding breeders and had little influence in the flock.

It is safe to say that an examination of the records of any successful herd or flock will show that it is due to the emergence within the flock of some one sire of outstanding breeding merit. Westbrooke No. 1 was the ancestor of another notable Waio ram 4.21, and this sheep carried on and accelerated the improvement initiated by No. 1. 4.21 was a very short-legged, heavy-boned ram, round in the rib and exceptionally well fleshed, and was just as much ahead of the rams of his day as the old ram was in 1901, and it was fortunate that R.W. recognised his worth. Past experience had shown the importance of close matings and when 4.21 came to service this practice was intensified with excellent results. It can be said that 4.21 did more than any other ram to bring about the modern type of short-legged, thick-fleshed Romney so keenly sought at present.

Naturally with his flock improving and attracting considerable attention the thoughts of the Waiorongomai owner turned to the show ring. The first sheep shown appeared to have been very closely related to imported stock and at one show rams by an imported sire secured the first four places in one class, and 1st for pairs. In all, sheep were shown on 21 occasions and won 18 championships. Sheep were exhibited only in the natural condition classes, but since 1905 Waio has not been directly represented in the N.Z. show ring, though many sheep bred in the flock have been prominent prize-takers. The most ambitious show undertaking was in 1915 when a ram was sent to the Panama Exposition and won all the awards for which he was eligible. Since that time though sheep have been sold to America none have been shown there.

The aim of the Matthews has been to breed sound sheep which would last and the esteem in which their sheep are held proves that, in some part at least, their aim has been achieved. It may be that the

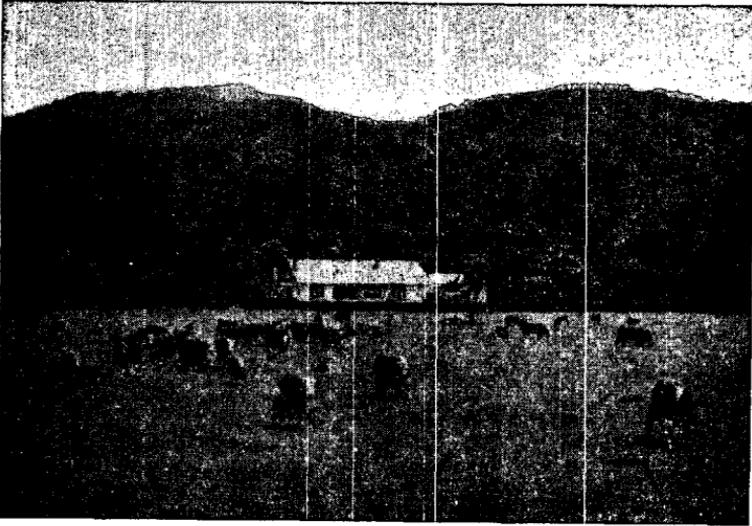


PLATE 1.

Present homestead with Hereford cattle in foreground (1920).



PLATE 2.

Stud sire, 1905—4-tooth.



PLATE 3.

Group of Sires, 1905—4-tooth.



PLATE 4.

Ajax, 400/17, at 4 years.



PLATE 5.

Group of 6-tooth rams descended from Westbrooke No. 1. Sire  
405/34 on left.



PLATE 6.

The present type.

poor conditions obtaining when the flock was started gave a toughness to the Waio sheep which still persists, and that an absolute refusal to embark on any spectacular breeding policy has played a part. Whatever has been the cause the fact remains that Waio is still a name to conjure with in the Romney world and that the Matthews reputation for straight dealing still holds.

It is interesting to note the change in the phenotype of the Waio sheep during the past 35 years, and particularly since pasture improvement became such an important feature of farm practice. There can be no doubt that the sheep are much heavier, but, unfortunately there is no data available to give the actual increase in weight. Lambing %'s are measurable and these show a general improvement and a marked decrease in the number of non-producing ewes is evident. Sheep losses have always been low and dosing is rarely necessary.

There seems little doubt that one secret of the general thrift of the flock is the room to move about owing to paddocks being much larger than is the case on farms of higher carrying capacity. To this may be added the fact that sheep at all times of the year have adequate water and shade and in winter a relatively dry bed.

In 1926, 200 of the best ewes were selected to form the A flock and this number has been increased to 400. The intention was to keep this as a self-contained unit and to use in it only top rams, which had been tried out in the general flock. The high percentage of A flock rams sold as studs is the best proof of the success of this move and there is no doubt that phenotypically the A ewes are of much higher standard than the main flock.

Individual records were kept from an early date and gradually all unrecorded sheep were eliminated and the present position as already indicated, is that every home bred sheep on the property traces directly to Westbroke No. 1, and if sold is transferred with its individual pedigree.

From time to time, purchases of rams have been made from breeders whose flocks are of Waio descent or where Waio rams have been extensively used, but none of these has been an outstanding success, although in some cases the ewe progeny have been excellent producers.

The accompanying photographs (Plates 2-6) clearly show the change which has been brought about in the Waio flock since 1903 when Westbroke No. 1 was first used, and reflect the general improvement of the Romney breed, an improvement in which Waio sheep have played an important part.

### **ALFRED MATTHEWS — THE MAN.**

Alfred Matthews was born in Wellington in 1845, five years after the family had landed in New Zealand, and his early years were spent there. It is recorded that when six years of age he accompanied his father to "Wharepapa," a journey made on foot and taking four days. He attended Mrs. Burton's school in Hobson Street and later Mr. De Castro's. His schooling ended when he was 15, as he was required at Wharepapa and two years later he was given sole control of the property.

From this very brief account of his early life it will be seen that Matthews had no training for the various responsibilities which came his way. That he early displayed qualities of sound judgment and independent thought is clear and that he never swerved from an objective is shown by the results he brought about in the enterprises he engaged.

When he took charge of the property fat sheep were selling at 7/- per head delivered Wellington, and bankers would not advance more than 2/- per head on the wool clip. Returns from farming did not allow much margin for developmental work, yet in the face of many difficulties he followed a set programme right through to completion. The systematic manner in which he set about clearing the country of wild cattle when really only a youth and the determination and initiative he showed in tackling the scab problem were a forecast of his latter attainments.

His neighbours soon realised his ability and honesty of purpose and in 1875 he was elected to the Featherston Highway Board and until his death was continuously engaged on public bodies. Had he lived a fortnight longer he would have completed 50 years of public service. Preparations to give public recognition of his long service were well in hand when news came of his death. Possessed of a remarkable memory and an enquiring mind, Matthews continued to educate himself throughout his busy life. It was touch and go whether he entered the ministry as his teachers wished or joined his father. That he took the latter course was probably due to his strong sense of duty rather than from inclination and it may be mentioned here that from the time the Waiorongomai house was built until his death, Matthews saw to it that a service was held every Sunday evening. Until the family later built the Church at Waiorongomai in memory of their parents, there was no place of worship on the Western Lake between Featherston and Wellington other than at Waio.

After Matthews established himself at Waiorongomai he held classes in the evenings for his employees and did all he could to help them to improve their education. The esteem in which he was held is shown by the fact that the third generation of the earliest Waiorongomai employees left the station just recently to take up farms for themselves. From a staff of four, the population of Waio now numbers 76 all told and houses have been built as required for the sons and grandsons of the original hands.

To every worthwhile cause Matthews was a generous donor and in many instances gave financial help to projects which he considered would be of value to the district, but in which he had no personal interest.

Though intent on having his way when he was convinced it was right, Matthews was able to handle delicate situations requiring the utmost tact, and this was never better exemplified than on the occasion of the trouble with the natives over the opening of the Lake—a problem which promised to become a major one. The settlers tacitly allowed Matthews to take control and by his just outlook so impressed the natives that they ultimately agreed to allow the outlet to be opened and instead of resorting to direct action as they threatened agreed to arbitration. When the case came for hearing Matthews' impartial statement on the position so impressed the natives that they readily agreed to the suggested terms. The dominating factors in his life were honesty and unselfish service. Possibly the finest epitaph to any man would be:

“He was respected and trusted by his fellows.”

This epitaph he truly earned and his life was one of service to his fellows and uprightness in all things and an inspiration to those who came after him.

Waiorongomai goes on, and the work of Alfred Matthews is not lost. The same ideals of honesty and fairness still dominate the thoughts for R.W. and J.R., son and grandson of the founder.