

FEATURE

# Where a community came to cheer

When the old Manaia grandstand is demolished, a major sporting link with the community's past will go. **DAVID BRUCE** uncovers a few stories

**A**T IRED old lady, her Edwardian flounces weather-beaten and her structure crumbling, the Manaia grandstand stares blankly across the playing fields she has watched over for five years short of a century.

Unwanted and unloved, replaced almost two decades ago with another grandstand of austere concrete and steel, her days are numbered. The oldest in Taranaki, a few months older than the grandstand at the Stratford A&P grounds, the stand will soon be demolished. Vandals have already started the job, kicked holes in the stand's sides, broken doors and structure, water flows to waste through the plumbing they have damaged. Rated unsafe and structurally unsound, the tiered seating is blocked off by rails and safety mesh. Only starlings enjoy the shelter where once crowds sat to watch the exploits of local champions.

Built by local carpenter Mr L. G. Neilson, the two-storey building cost the community \$346 when it was erected in 1909. It was an appropriate moment in time, with the Waimate rugby team then and for the next five years the provincial champions, flying flanker H. Tamukershaw selected for the New Zealand Maori tour to Australia and the fledgling Manaia Cricket Club beginning to feel its wings. In those pre-World War I days the new grandstand would have also watched over the town's Caledonian games, hockey matches and the athletics meetings that attracted competitors from throughout the country to line up against local champions.

The grounds in front of it were quieter during the war years, the axemen's carnivals and big events on hold until better times. They celebrated those in the 1920-21 cricket season by winning the South Taranaki championship for the first time. Manaia's doctor, William Maunsell, would have played a big part in that win. A regular high scorer, often not out in the 50s and 60s when an innings was declared, he later played county cricket for Worcester, completing his first season with a batting average of 55.

On Queen's Birthday weekend in 1932, the stand was crowded with dignitaries as Manaia celebrated its golden jubilee and the parade, which had earlier wound its way through the centre of town, circled the field in front of it. Behind the 32-piece Manaia Brass Band, Mr York Sheerin's bullock team trudged and 15 models of "modern" cars chugged. Nearby, hangi were opened, a "Maori pageant" performed and 33 teams took part in a regional hockey tournament.

John Graham's memory of the grandstand doesn't go quite that far back, but from the time he arrived in Manaia in 1940 it was the centre point of his playground. Search the inside back wall of the stand and there is carved proof. "There are some pretty famous names



THOSE WERE THE DAYS: Goldie Whalen (left) and John Graham reminisce about the old days in front of the old Manaia grandstand. Photo: CRAIG BATES



FIRST ELEVEN: The Manaia cricket team in the early decades of last century. Photo: SUPPLIED



GOOD TIMES: A bullock team passes the grandstand on a big show day in its early years. Photo: SUPPLIED

up there — Venn Young, Pierce Joyce — there would be at least 20 of them who went on to play for Taranaki."

John Graham himself was hooking for Taranaki when legendary All Black Bob Scott brought his Centurions to play at Manaia in 1957. The stand was packed that day and the ground was crammed, with 6000 spectators lining the field to watch the local boys test Scott's team of ex-All Blacks. The same year, Graham and four other Waimate players were in the Taranaki team that lifted the Ranfurly Shield from Otago.

The district was at the top of its game

then and the ground was in regular use. Graham remembers midweek inter-tribal games between local Maori clubs, matches between Hibernian societies and between the staff of the Kaupokonui and Joll dairy factories. He has proud memories of he and his four brothers all making the senior team in 1953 and Waimate winning the Taranaki championship in 1955.

"There seemed to always be a match of some sort and there was cricket, hockey, a top-class cycle track and athletics too. The starting point for a lot of good athletes was here."

Walk him round the old stand and he can point out its almost forgotten features, the blocked-over doorway where the cricket gear was stored, the central room where on really cold days the teams might dodge the weather at half-time, the boarded-up flap and counter where you could buy a pie and a cuppa — where the flagpole was and the criss-cross balustrade.

The first five-eighths of the championship-winning 1955 team, Nigel McLeod, remembers his mother, Adelaide, as a regular in the stand. She was notable both for her ardent support and for her

knitting — that never stopped no matter how exciting the game.

"Of course in those days, before they changed the lie of the ground, the old stand was on halfway and up until the 1960s it would have been full most Saturdays.

"When we were on a winning streak it would have been chocka and the crowd used to line the sideline as well. I can remember players having to dodge spectators on the way to scoring a try."

He can also remember the tough final tussle with Eltham that same year, when three Elthamians and one Waimate

player were sent off. But that is another story.

There were other regulars who never missed a game. John Graham remembers Shiny Whakaneke as one. Shiny preferred not to sit in the stand, but had a regular place out front.

"It wasn't as full for cricket, but old Edgar Putt would sit up there all day watching cricket and paying out half a crown to anyone who hit a six."

It would have been an expensive day for Edgar when big-hitting Norm Whalen hammered three straight drives down the wicket and into the stand, causing Goldie Whalen, who was acting as scorekeeper, to leave the stand for the safety of the ground.

Down the years the various games played in front of the old stand have been dominated by families, the five Graham brothers, two different Hughes families who came together to make an entire cricket team (with one member batting on well into his 60s and still scoring centuries) the Rei family and the Whalens. There were five members of the Whalen family in the Manaia cricket team that won the B grade championship in 1934-35. Goldie Whalen remembers that it was his father, Harry, who captained that team and promoted the resurgence of the game in the district.

"It was Dad really, he was born in Australia and knew all about the game, he wasn't a bad bowler either."

Goldie played both rugby and cricket, but chose to give priority to his career at the Joll factory at Kapuni.

"The boss said I could be fourth assistant there but I had to make a choice between sport and work — it was worth a couple of bob a month more, so I took it."

The Whalen brothers all served overseas during the war and all returned. After the war it was the youngest, Norman, along with Maitland and Goldie who kept the family name at the crease.

Not all cricket played in front of the domain stand was totally serious. Wartime friendships led to regular matches with the Grand Hotel team from Wanganui, which continued into the 1960s — the trophy, a toilet seat mounted with two miniature bats, the Frothblower's Shield.

In 1972 the club won the Betts Memorial Trophy — the Taranaki championship. In his 26th season in the team, John Graham, too, played his part in the club's most successful year.

Elaine Goodin was on the scene by then, her husband Kevin one of the cricket club's rising stars.

"Saturdays were family days then. Wives and fiancées sat to watch the game, with little ones running around and picnic lunches spread out on blankets."

The counter might have been down under the stand in those sunny days, and soft drinks for sale. Elaine tells of Christmas parties, even club dinners held under the grandstand until the late 70s.

Things changed then and by 1982 the cricket club had moved house to new clubrooms in Manaia's sports complex. The new stand and the reorientation of the fields saw the end of the old grandstand's glory days. A new roof and seating in the mid 1990s and a freshening of its traditional cream and red paint job were concessions to its age but did not really reflect its use.

There is an old zambuck's stretcher in the room that once held cricket gear and the coir mats used on the concrete pitch, holes in the wall of the clubroom. A new generation of vandals has spray-painted graffiti over the carved initials of those of the past.

With her time running out, worn and tired, the old lady basks in the sun, gazes blankly over the playing fields and reflects on the changes she has seen. □