

# Searching for gold in the Tararuas

The News, Wednesday, October 5, 1983

## This is a story of prospecting for minerals, especially gold, in the Tararua Ranges.

The leading person in this was Mr Charles Williams, who came to Levin in 1899, becoming the licensee of the Weraroa Hotel.

This was sited where the Weraroa dairy is now on the corner of Oxford and Ward Streets. It was a two storeyed timber building erected in 1895 and was destroyed by fire on March 15, 1912.

The Grand Hotel was then built using the liquor licence from the Weraroa Hotel. Regulations then in force restricted the transfer of a licence more than a halfmile.

As the Grand Tavern this hotel was gutted by fire in 1981 and now Cobb & Co occupy the site.

Charlie Williams was the licensee of the Weraroa Hotel until 1903 when he bought the general store business on the opposite corner, conducting this business until an unknown date. This shop was a gro-

cery business conducted by various proprietors (except for between 1922 and about 1926 when Mr Harold Hudson used it for his wheelwright business) until 1978 when it was destroyed by fire.

## Stood for Mayor

Charlie Williams stood for Mayor of the newly constituted Levin Borough in 1906 and was apparently promised large support. He suffered from a speech affliction. On being defeated he addressed the gathering thus: "All I can say is there's two hundred bbb... liars in Levin."

The official count showed that he had 120 faithful supporters. Mr B. R. Gardener polled 256 votes and Mr John Davies polled 129. Charlie Williams however succeeded in 1907 to be elected a borough councillor.

For some years there had been talk that there was gold in the Tararua Ranges, fostered to a large extent by Charlie Williams

who claimed that he had been involved in mining and engineering on the West Coast of the South Island, possessing a mine manager's certificate of competency and also a mine surveyors certificate.

At the time a Horowhenua Development Association existed, which avidly promoted the prospecting proposal. A company was formed, the Horowhenua Mineral Prospecting Association. Mr James Malcomb was chairman with Messrs B. R. Gardener, E. Lancaster, J. McCleavey, W. Palmer, Dr. McKenzie and C. Williams as secretary.

The public was asked to subscribe to 400 \$2 shares.

## Enthusiasm high

Enthusiasm was high at first with first callup of 25 cents a share. Three hundred and seventy shares had been sold but the next call for cash experienced some difficulty. Enthusiasm was waning.

Many letters were published in the Chronicle against the prospecting

proposal. Some people were of the opinion that the Tararua Ranges were not mineral country. One writer, Plum Pie, in several letters was critical of Charlie Williams' competency as a miner and his ability to collect 5 percent commission on the call up cash. Plum Pie claimed the commission should not be paid until the shares were fully paid up. He also said that there was no more gold in the ranges than there was coal in Horowhenua Lake.

## Subsidy granted

The Government was asked for a subsidy and after a deputation and many letters a subsidy was granted of \$2 a week per man for a team of five men for three months.

It was resolved to send a prospecting party into the Tararua Ranges. The Horowhenua Chronicle of March 12 1912 reported the following.

## Off to the ranges

This morning shortly after 11 am Mr C. Williams and Mr E. Edgar, who have

been selected by the Horowhenua Prospecting Association to prospect the Tararua Ranges for minerals, set out from Levin on their expedition. Only a few citizens were present on the Square when the party left and the official promise of the band to play the prospectors off was not fulfilled, but Mr W. C. Nation, one of the oldest settlers, took the opportunity to say a few words.

He said "The question of prospecting the ranges had

reports of success though. Later Charlie Williams claimed that an assay done on samples sent to the Thames School of Mines proved \$2.40 to the ton. He also did some prospecting at the head of the Otaki River with no success.

## Wound up

The company was wound up on November 5, 1912. There was a surplus of \$30.70. This was distributed to various charities. Residents of Beach Road (now Hokio Beach Road) had started a subscription list for funds to improve the road as the country did not have any money to do it. Ten dollars was granted to the subscription list.

The writer has heard this story over the years and that Charlie Williams had some harsh words said to him about the affair.

At the time of the prospecting expedition and in after years there was a certain amount of derision about the whole affair.

In 1967 The Chronicle printed a story of the affair: "One of the named perpetrators was Charlie Williams. He was known in the early days of the town as a bit of a wag and he was 'mine host' of the Weraroa Hotel. He went to a lot of trouble setting up what he called The Horowhenua Prospecting Association. His name appeared as secretary."

The late Mr H. (Bert) Denton told the story thus: "With some spare time on his hands Charlie spread the word that there was gold to be found in the Ohau Valley and that it only required a little enterprise and enthusiasm to collect it. As he was reputed to be an old West Coast miner of some experience his opinion carried weight."

"After considerable oratory he passed round the hat and some of our gold seeking enthusiasts were persuaded to throw in their spare shillings and pence in order to defray the expenses of the project. This contribution was to be spent in providing rations and other necessities peculiar to the profession.

"Eventually Mr Williams and two other stalwarts set out on their expedition. It was said these gentlemen spent a really enjoyable time for some weeks on the quest. However like all good things it came to an end for rations were consumed. This led to the return of the pioneers greatly invigorated by their adventure."

"History does not relate whether a balance sheet was presented to the shareholders but the project was not followed up and the whole incident sank into oblivion."

The late Mr Denton concluded his version by enquiring if there were any ex-shareholders still around and if any had got any share of "the gravy".

Apparently no one could be found who did but at least they could say that they had once been shareholders of the one and only Horowhenua Prospecting Association. And what's more they had signed receipts and a prospectus to prove it.

Such was the case of one Chronicle reader, Mr W. H. Rolston, the purchaser of one whole share to the face value of \$2. Mr Rolston told The Chronicle that in fact a balance sheet was presented and everything laid out in black and white in a proper printed form. Apparently a Government subsidy was shown.

Mr Williams and his merry men who apparently even had the local band play them out of town, said on his return that he had found some gold but not in commercial quantities.

"But as far as the shareholders were concerned the only gold was what came out of our pockets" said Mr Rolston.

Writers note: The item above about the band can be explained by the fact that the memories were of about 50 years back.

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A voluntary contribution by Francis Corison Swanwick, Horowhenua Historical Society.



BY F.C. SWANWICK



been mooted for years but nothing effective had transpired until now when a community had subscribed sufficient funds to send out two men prospecting the ranges. He believed there were minerals in the ranges whether coal or gold and he heartily wished the explorers success."

The prospectors then walked to Mr Milnes residence and from whence he drove them by way of Gladstone Road to the Ohau where they will pitch camp for the evening. It is understood they will work their way to the Mangahao Stream. Mr Williams hopes to return for a day to Levin in a fortnight's time and report progress."

On April 1 the party returned after three weeks. They had camped at the second forks of the Ohau River taking seven hours to get there. There were no reports of minerals. They returned to their camp in the Ohau River with fresh provisions on April 1.

After a total of seven weeks prospecting the party returned, with only vague



"MILLIONAIRE" WHITE (AT LEFT) JAMES MIDDLETON (2nd FROM LEFT) CHARLIE WILLIAMS (2nd FROM RIGHT) J.W. HAYFIELD (EXTREME RIGHT)

THE Weraroa Hotel, destroyed by fire some time about 1910. The licence then moved to the Grand, which itself was destroyed by fire in 1981.

## Brought back memories for Mr Welby

The recent History at Home article (Weekly News October 5) featuring Mr Charles Williams, licensee of the Weraroa Hotel from 1899 to 1903, brought back memories for 90-year-old Mr Charles Welby, of Levin.

Reminded of Mr Williams' speech affliction by the reference to his remarks on being defeated

as mayoral candidate in 1906, Mr Welby said he recalls a race meeting in Levin in about 1904. Mr Williams owned a horse called General Stossell which was racing that day ridden by Charley Jenkins.

"As they came down the straight General Stossell was in the lead and Charlie Williams rose to his feet

shouting "General Stossell all de vay, General Stossell all de vay" (all the way).

The Weraroa Hotel Mr Welby remembers well. "I attended school in a hall behind the hotel before the Weraroa School was established. We used to slip round to play marbles on the concrete in front of the hotel," he recalled.

The arrival of trains at the railway station opposite the hotel was an event in those days. Mr Welby said he was often there to watch and tells the story of one occasion when one passenger agreed to dash across to the hotel to buy a shilling bottle of beer for another traveller — and come out of the pub door in time to see the train disappearing down the line.

THE CORRECT STORY IS THAT THE PASSENGER ASKED A MAN ON THE STATION TO BUY A BOTTLE OF BEER FOR HIM, PURPOSELY DELAYED RETURNING TO THE TRAIN UNTIL IT WAS PULLING OUT.