Barrie Smith: A brief history of Taranaki's flax industry

Barrie Smith • 06:00, Oct 26 2018

BARRIE SMITH

Flax production in Taranaki in the early 1900s

A couple of months ago I watched on TV a very interesting programme called "Coast NZ", which centred on coastal areas of Taranaki.

One item touched on in our early years was the growing and harvesting of flax, which literally grew into quite a large business. I was inspired to research the subject and I was amazed at what I found as it is something that most of us know little about.

We do know that flax was widely used by Māori for probably hundreds of years for making skirts, baskets, eel traps etc.

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Taranaki's flax industry in the early 1900s

The first European interest in the flax came during 1793 when Lieutenant-Governor King, of Norfolk Island, decided to solve his flax processing problems by kidnapping two Māori male dressers from NZ.

Unfortunately for King the two men had very limited knowledge of the business as it was the Māori women who did all the work. The two men were treated well then returned to NZ sometime later.

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One of the first known mills in NZ was at Port William, Stewart Island. It was operating as early as 1813 but did not survive for long.

By 1830 regular exports were made to Australia from various trading ports around NZ's coastline. Around 1870 it was estimated that some 300 mills were operating in New Zealand.

anchors were essential items.

It is recorded that during the 1700s the British Navy needed an estimated 25000 kilometres of rope annually.

In Taranaki, flax growing became known as "Green Gold" and the industry grew quickly as we had a suitable climate and lots of swampy areas near our coastal regions.

It is worth noting that the Highway from New Plymouth to Ōpunake, now known as Surf Highway 45, was originally surveyed on a line which defined the mountain bush with the flax-growing coastal lands. As we know, the present highway travels very close to Parihaka Pa, whose Māori would have used flax extensively.

In those early years the infamous Dicky Barrett became well known as a trader in flax to supplement his income, trading mostly with Australian merchants wanting his "stripped flax", most of which was going to Sydney as early as 1830.

It is known that Dicky Barrett was the first European in Taranaki to trade this product. I believe Māori were a little exploited as for every ton of fibre they processed for Dicky they received one musket and powder, in what was known as trading but I'm not sure it was fair trading.

As I said earlier, processing flax was known as a Maori woman's job, but I also understand that during various tribal battles prisoners were taken as slaves then put to work stripping flax using shells.

This period was followed by a few Māori/European scraps after which the Māori slave numbers dropped away.

Eventually the government saw the need for mechanisation to speed up the stripping of the flax leaves. Cash rewards were offered to those who designed and built suitable machines. Most used water power, but with the advent of steam some were steam driven.

This speeded up the flax industry immensely, with some 20 mills opening from Awakino in the north to Ōpunake in the south. Just from the Stoney River at Ōkato to the Oaonui near Ōpunake there were nine mills in operation employing 258 staff plus some 200 Maori to cut flax.

On top of this number, many were employed in offshoots of the industry. So the demand for labour was quite intense with many of the early immigrants going straight into the flax industry.

But on the downside the industry did suffer boom and bust periods. When demand was high things were good, but as worldwide mechanisation stepped up, such as steam-powered ships and the importation of goods from other countries, decline set in.

The Spanish/American war of 1888 severely affected hemp imports from Manila, which turned into a boom for NZ, but the war was short lived.

Then in the early 1900s a virus called "yellow leaf" swept through the flax growing areas, which had a devastating effect on the whole industry.

Land was being drained for livestock farming and new varieties of flax were being grown on dryer lands, and it's thought this was the cause of the virus.

So some areas, having been drained, were flooded, and - guess what - the flax flourished again, but it was probably the beginning of the end for such a large industry.

The early 1900s saw the advent of new reapers and binders, machines which caused an upsurge in demand for twine. Some mills that had closed re-opened, but again this was reasonably short lived.

It was around this period that Donaghys Rope and Twine Company established a huge industry in Dunedin, which became dominant. Also at Foxton, where flax grew abundantly in swamps, another huge industry was set up, which many of us will recall as we drove south. I remember seeing the huge rows of flax hung out to dry on long racks before the final process.

The First World War certainly had a bearing on the industry as demand for ropes of all sizes was great, but the downside was that labour was short, with most able-bodied men away fighting for our country.

Flax was pulled out, the bush was cut and our now huge dairy industry grew into what we have today – a $20b industry feeding a billion people around the world, providing 50 per cent of our National GDP.

We have achieved this through new machinery, technology and science and now have farmers second to none in the world.

But as we look back at the flax industry of NZ it is simply amazing what was achieved for that period of time. We should all be proud of the sheer guts and determination of these early pioneers and Maori alike for their huge input into a huge industry.

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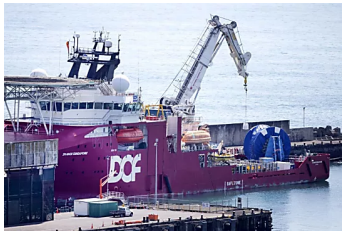

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