

Early welfare in Kurow, New Zealand

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epress@unitec.ac.nz
www.unitec.ac.nz/epress/

Unitec Institute of Technology
Private Bag 92025, Victoria Street West
Auckland 1142
New Zealand

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DAVID HAIGH

This story is taken mainly from the booklet *Four Shillings and Threepence* (2008), produced by the Kurow Heritage & Information Centre.

One of New Zealand's first hydroelectric power stations was built on the Waitaki River, which separates Canterbury from Otago. Construction started in 1928 and was completed in 1934, the period of the Great Depression. The project was a type of 'make-work' scheme, and as such there were no machines to dig the site. It was all done by hand, using pick, shovel and wheelbarrow. "More than half-a-million cubic metres of material was excavated manually while steam-powered pumps kept the area dry" (p. 12).

With such a massive development, a new temporary Waitaki Village for workers was created near Kurow. Fifteen hundred workers were involved in the project as well as others (around 350) who were unemployed and looking for work. Up to 2000 workers were housed in huts and the rest in canvas tents. One person stated that, "because it was so cold, the whole family slept in the same bed to stay alive" (p. 15). The unemployed created their own village nearby, built of willow branches and tin cans.

The opening of the village was held on October 27th 1934 and the dignitaries included the Governor General, the Prime Minister and (important for this story) Michael Joseph Savage, Leader of the Labour Opposition. Earlier, Savage had toured the South Island and visited the Waitaki scheme and Kurow. He described it as follows:

...the icy wind from the Alps lanced down from the Waitaki Valley, freezing not only the men slaving with pick and shovel, but also the women and children inadequately clothed in cotton frocks and threadbare jerseys, without stockings or shoes, and housed in tents and makeshift shacks under the willow trees. (p. 16)

The camp was large enough to prompt the establishment of a Benevolent Society called the Waitaki Medical Association. The doctor and dentist, coupled with the Kurow maternity hospital, provided for the medical services of the workforce and their families. The subscription fees were 4s 3d per month. In 1929, Dr David McMillan became the medical officer for the association. Two other newcomers, along with McMillan, became important in the development of welfare services to the workers. They were Arnold Nordmeyer (the Presbyterian church minister for Kurow) and Andrew Davidson, the high-school headmaster. These 'Three Wise Men' had a profound influence. The association also established a health-insurance scheme with a contribution of one shilling per month. This was important in protecting people from accidents, which were common on the construction site. McMillan set up a drop-in centre for travelling swaggers and unemployed men. At the centre they could get a meal and a bed for the night.

Davidson is quoted as saying, "The ideology of the Christian Socialist is set deeper and is more penetrating than of the conventional church attender.... We were fired with a fervent desire to create a new society" (p. 25).

Based on what had been achieved, Dr McMillan presented a report to the New Zealand Labour Party conference in 1934. The system was a template for a New Zealand-wide health service. It was adopted in principle and was published as "A national health service: New Zealand of to-morrow." In 1935, both McMillan and Nordmeyer were elected to the first Labour Government; McMillan became Minister of Health. In 1941, Nordmeyer took over as Minister of Health and had to deal with a belligerent British Medical Association that denied the need for a health service. All three wise men of Kurow were committed to the principles of Christian socialism. Later, Savage proclaimed that his government's commitment to the welfare state was 'applied Christianity'.



David Haigh has a long career in community development. He is the former head of CD for the Auckland Regional Authority and has recently retired from Unitec, where he taught in social practice and not-for-profit management. David is active in Auckland Action Against Poverty.