



Hikuwai 3. (Old bridge) Gisborne Museum Collection 1907.

Bridge breakers in back-blocks

Seven men and one woman in the wop wops. The men were there to demolish two bridges, the woman to find out how it was done.

For Maggie Timu Kerrigan, freelance journalist, it meant spending time with a demolition crew in Arero, Tolaga Bay.

For the men it was also a new experience as they were more used to demolishing buildings. It was their first time wrecking a bridge.

They'd got the job following publication of a story Maggie had written about their demolition work. To them Maggie was good luck so they asked her to come along for the ride.

Hastings Demolition got the contract to demolish the two bridges, Hikuwai 3 and 4 after faults were first found in 1965. The need to demolish did not become urgent until last years drought in the East Coast region when big rigs were permitted to take class one loads over class two bridges such as Hikuwai 3 and 4, provided the county councils were informed.

However the Ministry of Transport said there were many overweight rigs on the East Coast roads subjecting bridges to excessive impact loading, and the Waiapu County engineer said some loads had been sneaking past instead of going round Opotiki via Gisborne.

Ministry of Works spokesman, Phil Gall said the bridges had been in the news before, after MOW checks in 1964 revealed cracks in Hikuwai 4 after only three years being completed.

The MOW wanted the bridge demolished with 'kid gloves' so as not to damage the steel girders, thereby making re-decking much quicker. But this posed a problem for the two demolition machines having to perch on girders high above a steep ravine. The machines were a Fiat Allis, used with a rock-breaker to smash the concrete decking, and a Poclain used with a bucket to clear away and dump broken slabs.

And the men who worked the machines: Simon Sheratt the foreman driving the Poclain, the other Simon driving the Fiat Allis, and Ralph and Rangi on the ground cutting steel mesh reinforcing.

For the writer, Maggie Kerrigan, going along for the ride resulted in this colourful story and great action photographs as the men of Hastings Demolition went about their task.

"The Fiat Allis bores the rock-breaker into the decking the bridge

vibrating with each strike — broken concrete falling through to land in the river below — dust billows up to cloud the air — after one section is broken the Poclain would clank to the spot to peel back the concrete — this method was tried first — it remains to be seen whether it will work. "In theory — says Ralph ruefully — it might work."

Its getting pretty shaky up there now, a quarter of the deck is peeled back revealing the outside girder the steel mesh and broken concrete curving towards the opposite side like an open grave — it looks like someone painted himself into a corner — but being resourceful they soon found the best way to tackle it. Ralph cutting the steel bolts holding the railing with the gas torch — Rangi hanging over the edge undoing the nuts — what he couldn't undo — Ralph cut it.

The sparks from the torch cascading into the tinder-dry grass beneath the bridge are starting fires — the men hope the fires don't catch on to the scrub and the trees, they'd never be able to stop it. Simon or Rangi stop what they were doing — to slide down the soft sandy bank to stamp out the flames. The river is almost dry — a brave flow of stagnant water struggling to reach down-river — in the drought this river like countless others all over the Bay — fights to keep the moisture — a losing battle in the intense heat of later days.

The bridge deck is intensely hot, and the men working have no drinkable water at the site — the flagon full they brought with them in the morning is almost gone and it's only early smoko time. Day after day the shortage forces them to drink what they can find — a neighbouring farmhouse has water of a sorts — they have to strain the bugs out of it before they boil it. Either that, or the river — and before many days were up the men plucked up courage to drink the warm slimy water — any water is better than nothing.

On some days the weather is biting cold, a still breeze blowing through the hills and ridges sends the men seeking discarded jerseys and coats — earlier removed in the heat of the first working hours. An extreme change in temperature, but still no hope for rain — every

A long view of the Fiat Allis perched high.

