

Taupiri mountain shelters ancient canoe

by Sonya Haggie

A Maori canoe believed to be more than 155 years old rests at the foot of Taupiri mountain.

It has been there, outside Roy Nepe's house behind the mountain, almost since the day it was taken from the water to rest near Roy's long-dead great grandmother, Awhipera Rea Nepe.

Roy's uncle, Dan Nepe, can still remember growing up in Taupiri and hearing of the old life from Awhipera, who raised him.

He grew up in Taupiri, near Hamilton, beneath the shadow of the mountain sacred for its burial place where tribal members, leaders and royal family are laid to rest.

It was Awhipera who dated the canoe, named Te Hukere, that is believed to be made of kauri. Dan, now 64, remembers her telling him Te Hukere was built long before she was born in 1827, making it at least 155 years old.

Awhipera died in 1935 at the age of 108. Te Hukere carried her from where she lay in state to her grave on the mountain, near Waikato river.

In the family

According to the Dan, the canoe has been in the Nepe family since it was built by master carvers from Huntly.

It was named Te Hukere when it was built.

"Te hukere is when you paddle and the water comes off the paddle. That is te hukere," he says.

"It never sinks. I tried it when I was a kid. Even when it's filled with water it flows under the surface like a submarine."

Perhaps its most important task was its duty during the Maori wars.

"My grandmother remembered it being used to carry messages to the warriors," he says.

"It also used to be used for carrying food. This canoe was the one that was taking food to the warriors through the swamps."



Roy Nepe with son Syrus and the canoe. "It's all the old people left us".

Young days

"In my younger days I was very hard on the canoe. I used to cart sheep, cows, even pigs on it. We used it like a truck on the river.

"You can fit four paddlers in it. It is very fast. That's why it was the messenger. It was one of the fastest canoes in its heyday."

Dan says an incident several years ago was the reason Te Hukere was taken from the water and landed.

During a river flood Te Hukere broke free from a tree it was chained to and floated to Meremere where it beached near the power station, he says.

When local Maori workers discovered the canoe they refused to work until it had been removed.

"It was some Maori fellows who found it and took off. They reckoned it was a taniwha (spirit).

"They had to get the tohungas (priests) to bless the place because that sort of thing is bad luck.

"I believe it decided to break away and go on its own. To me it was looking for the tupuna (ancestors), you know, because it felt it was of no use to the young ones.

"It was fretting for the old people."

Broke free

He also believes the canoe broke free from the thick chain it was held with to become a taniwha "in its own right".

He remembers his grandmother telling him that every year when the Waikato river floods the taniwhas "meet and have their council".

The canoe, he says, attended that

meeting and became a taniwha.

"I am one of the last ones to be told all this."

When the canoe was returned from Meremere it was landed at Dan's mothers' place until she died. Then it was given to Roy, the eldest son in the Nepe family.

"I want to keep Te Hukere in the family. It's something solid from the past," Dan says.

Duck shooting

Roy farms land belonging to the Nepe family that is at the foot of Taupiri mountain on the side opposite State Highway One.

He recalls times spent duck shooting in Te Hukere and carting cows from one side of a creek to another before the road was established on the farm.

He has had the canoe for about 10 years and intends passing it on to his eldest son, three-year-old Syrus.

No way would he let a museum have it.

"It becomes a 10-minute wonder after a while if it's in a museum. But if it's in your own backyard you've got something to hang on to.

"That is all we've got. It's all the old people left us.

"I don't know about this generation here," he says, pointing to Syrus. "They will probably use fast cars and all, but I like the old canoe."

He says he will restore it and one day hopes to get it back on the water.

And glancing at Syrus he says, "I've got to teach this young fella here how to paddle yet."