

Maori Settlement

a Koroio Report



IT'S NOT far from Whakatane on the coast to Taneatua, the railhead of the Bay of Plenty line. Neither is it far on from Taneatua up the Opouriao Valley to Ruatoki. It is a short trip, but a worthwhile one especially if you time your arrival for about 8 a.m. Then you will be rewarded with a sight unique in New Zealand to-day. In front of the cheese-factory and the double-decker store that is Ruatoki's shopping centre you will see dozens of old spring carts and an odd four-wheeled wagon standing about the road while their Maori owners hold a *korero* on the footpath or make their day's purchases at the store. Between the shafts, strong, shaggy, horses stand quietly, and on each cart two or three milk-cans gleam in the morning sunlight. It's the end of the "Milk Cart Derby."

For the last hour or so the carts have been rattling in along the rough roadways leading in from the 120 farms that comprise the settlement. Driven by laughing brown-skinned men and women and carrying, in addition to their load of primary produce, some part of the farmer's family, they have come from the flats across the Whakatane River, from the rolling hills beyond and from as far as six miles up the valley that is the gateway to the Urewera Country. Oc-

asionally a foal trots beside the mare drawing the cart, and around the crunching wheels lope scores of dogs of doubtful pedigree. From all parts of the valley the threads of the procession have wound in to be drawn into a colourful cloth here in the commercial centre of Ruatoki.

Now the work that began at 4 a.m. is for the moment ended and every one is chatting away in Maori and laughing merrily at some local wit while the cans rattle busily down at the factory and the horses stamp on the metal road.

The "Milk Cart Derby," as it is known to many who have seen it, is the key to Ruatoki. This valley is Native land and is being farmed by the Maori owners with the assistance and supervision of the Native Department. It is only one of the many Native-land-development schemes scattered throughout New Zealand, but it is one of the most compact and successful. Less than fifteen years ago the valley was being haphazardly farmed by the Native owners. Land titles were neither secure nor well defined, and consequently the land was badly fenced. Pastures were poor, and the dairy herds well below the average in butterfat-producing capacity. Housing conditions and the milking-sheds were most unsatisfactory. Nor were the Tuhoe,