



# The Heart of the Mackenzie

GREG KNOWLES

Many New Zealanders know Lake Tekapo as one of the most spectacular ‘ice cream stops’ in the country. A township nesting on the edge of the turquoise waters of a glacial lake, trapped by the debris of ancient glaciers, in the Godley Valley. This is the heart of the Mackenzie Country and the people, heartland Kiwis. But it is not all ice cream and spectacular views. This country can be harsh and unforgiving and can test the toughest.

**T**he view still produces smiles of delight on the faces of those driving down into the township’s basin on their journey south. For the ice cream eaters, it is this undisturbed and pure beauty they remember, but for those fortunate enough to live in this ice cream eaters paradise, the view is just a fact of life, but never taken for granted.

While Tekapo boasts one of the highest number of sunshine hours in New Zealand, the mercury plummets below zero during the cold, dry Mackenzie winters.

While urban cousins may spend hours in fluorescent-lit, air conditioned gyms keeping their fitness levels up, many locals know a world where daily work can be physically hard and exercise is simply the result of it.

When you meet high country farmer Jim Murray for the first time, you’ll remember his hand shake, it could send a city slicker for an X-ray.

Jim and wife Anne, are high country run

holders - or were. Glenmore Station, on the western shores of Lake Tekapo is now the responsibility of son Will and his wife Emily, the fourth generation in the Murray’s one hundred year association with this land.

Glenmore Station is almost half the area of Christchurch City and varies in altitude from seven hundred metres above sea level at the shores of Tekapo, to over two and a half kilometres high in the magnificent Cass Valley.

High country farming is a different operation to its lowland relation. The fertile paddocks of the low country farm are replaced by grandiose mountain peaks, vertical bluffs and crumbling slopes eroding into slow moving shingle fans, that eventually crawl into the path of unpredictable rivers. All of this is home to the hardest of sheep, the Merino, known globally for its fine wool - and is also perhaps home to the hardest of New Zealanders.

The sheep spend the warm summer months grazing the alpine meadows of the mountain



IMAGES: TEKAPO TOURISM

slopes; slopes that will be covered in deep snow during winter. To avoid large scale losses over the winter months, the merino ewes are 'search and rescued' annually in an operation called the 'Autumn Muster'.

Glenmore's Autumn muster involves two weeks of tough living in the back country huts of the station. Trudging every slope of the long high country valleys, the musterers find the sheep and bring them down to lower paddocks for the winter and in readiness for the spring lambing.

While a farmer's day revolves around the land and the cycle of life and death often associated with it, one could form a mental picture of a rustic mountain man - the sort that advertising agencies dream about; not a man you would imagine sending you underwear, but Jim can turn his hand to that also..

Several years ago Anne took the success of their high country station to the retail market. The high country's merino wool has long



been associated with quality clothing. Anne recognised the relationship and took their involvement a step further by establishing a Tekapo based clothing business that has also embraced the Internet.

When Will decides that Dad has finished his farm chores for the day, Jim heads for town where he, Anne and the store's manager can often be found packing orders and shipping them off to customers all over the world. Not many farmers could boast a complete involvement in a product's journey from the sheep's back to the customer.

Lake Tekapo's community does not completely revolve around farming or the more recent developments in tourism.

People like husband and wife team Alan Gilmore and Pam Kilmartin add diversity to this Mackenzie country community. Alan and Pam, both technicians and observers at the University of Canterbury's Mount John observatory for over a decade, are now resident on the summit of

this huge lump of rock, Mt John. Alan has been the superintendent of the facility for several years. Meet him and you'll also meet a smile so genuine you could use it as security for a home loan.

There wouldn't be too many scientists in the world with their own tractor-snow plough parked in the driveway but the heavy snows of a Tekapo winter increase in depth with altitude and Alan has to snow plough the road in winter to keep it open.

Their dedication revolves around the sun - literally, for the subject of their skyward research is asteroids, those chunks of rock that never quite formed into the inner planets of our solar system. Most of us probably don't take much notice of asteroids until one of them becomes an NEA, Near-Earth Asteroid; the ones Hollywood makes movies about. Pam and Alan are on a first name basis with many asteroids, have named several discoveries and have even have a couple named after them.

**There wouldn't be too many scientists in the world with their own tractor-snow plough parked in the driveway...**





Ask either of them to do something for the local community and their immediate response is 'when do we start?'

Examples of Alan and Pam's work can be viewed with one of Lake Tekapo's more recent businesses, Earth and Sky, that takes visitors on day and night tours of Mt John and the University of Canterbury's observatory.

Tekapo has been broadening it horizons in recent years and is becoming one of New Zealand's more 'natural' tourist destinations. One of the tourism pioneers is Richard Rayward of Air Safaris. Meet Richard and you quickly draw the conclusion that he would have been one of the gentlemen of an industry known for its 'unique' characters. He began his aviation career in the engineering sector of small aircraft but it wasn't long before his work with aircraft developed into that of pilot.

#### Richard and his wife

Rosslyn became involved in the venison recovery industry, an industry that set records for unbelievable flying in fixed wing aircraft. The definition of a good landing was one you walked away from, off a rough and ready airstrip.

Once Richard walked into a remote valley in Fiordland with a pick and shovel, built an

airstrip on the riverbed, walked out, drove up to Wellington and flew an aircraft the length of the South Island to land on his new airstrip.

Stories include one of Richard and Rosslyn camping in the upper branches of a tree during a massive flood that drove them from their hut.

As New Zealand's deer recovery industry declined, the Raywards relocated to Mesopotamia Station at the head of the Rangitata River and began flying hunters into the bush. This brought about the name 'Air Safaris', a name that was retained when the tourism side of the business began.

The early days of 'Air Safaris' began with a simple airstrip constructed on the outskirts of

...he walked into a remote valley in Fiordland with a pick and shovel, built an airstrip on the riverbed, walked out, drove up to Wellington...

Lake Tekapo, within the tussocks of the Mackenzie Country. Customers were often collected from town by Rosslyn in a Holden station wagon then taken on a fifty minute flight with Richard, around, arguably, the best scenery in the southern hemisphere.

The pioneering nature of the company continued with the purchase of the first turbine prop 'Pilatus Porter' in New Zealand. The Porter, a real performer, is famous for its near vertical descents and extremely short take-off and landing ability. Rumour has it that Richard



Rayward is the only pilot ever to have landed across the runway at Dunedin's airport in a display of this aircraft's performance! And so the legends of Tekapo and the Mackenzie country grow. This is a region of Canterbury that was established on the legend of James Mackenzie. Mackenzie's dog Friday is the subject of the sculpture created in acknowledgement of the work of the sheep dogs of the area. It seems the people are imbued with Mackenzie's toughness, legend makers in their own right. They know work can be hard in the raw and undeveloped beauty of the Mackenzie country but they also know the rewards of living in one of the most picturesque, 'ice cream stops' in New Zealand. .



The New Zealand sheep dog highly intelligent and loyal is an essential element of farm life whether in the high country or the lowlands. James Mackenzie's dog Friday was exceptional and when Mackenzie went to gaol there were many who wanted him, however, his loyalty was to Mackenzie and he would work for no-one else.

1855

*'Before being sentenced, Mackenzie begged, with tears in his eyes that his dog might be allowed to accompany him to goal. That it seems was not allowed by the goal authorities, for the dog was taken south, where for years afterwards her progeny were much sought after by runholders and shepherds.'*

Saturday July 28th 1855 Otago Witness

We understand that the notorious sheep-stealer, M'Kenzie made his escape from the Lyttelton jail on Tuesday evening last. From what we have learned, it appears that he had been for sometime engaged in cooking the food required for the prison, his chance of escape being, as it was supposed, sufficiently prevented by a pair of 12' pound shackles round his ankles. However M'Kenzie contrived to bolt, fetters and all while the goarer was employed locking up other prisoners. A very active pursuit has been instituted, and we have no doubt he will be speedily recaptured. Standard, June 21.1853

'Early next morning, taking the boy and two men, he started in pursuit, and about dinner-time came to Mackenzie on a knoll, the pack bullock grazing near him, the sheep in front, and the dog lying nearby.

Mackenzie knew very little English, but he mastered enough to innocently ask Sidebottom "Who seep dat?" Sidebottom told him he knew perfectly well whose sheep they were, and called the men to seize him. Mackenzie objected, and showed fight, on which the men cleared to a safe distance, leaving the two to fight it out. They were both powerful men, Mackenzie lean and muscular, Sidebottom tall and robust. After a scuffle Sidebottom threw and held him down, seeing which the men took heart of grace, and, coming up, he was speedily secured with ropes, taken back to Timaru, and given into custody. This led to the discovery of the Mackenzie Country, and