

Interview with Forbes Knight

Forbes Knight is from a family with a long connection with Waipori. In this interview he recalls some of his life experiences in Otago.

Interviewer: Roger Cotton

Interviewee: Forbes Knight

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Place of interview: Forbes Knight's residence, Millers Flat, Otago.

The interview has been lightly edited for clarity. Unclear passages are enclosed in [square brackets].

It's Roger Cotton here interviewing Forbes Knight, and he's going to tell us a little bit about himself and his life and Waipori. And so we've got a few questions for Forbes, and the first question for you is tell us your date of birth and where you were born.

Well my birthday is the 14th of the first 1932, and I was born in Dunedin — January the 14th.

Did you ever move to Waipori or live out at Waipori?

Yes. I lived at Waipori Falls not Waipori itself.

How long did you live there for?

Well, I was there most of my life until I was about 17, when I shifted out of there and headed off to Ocean Beach, and then jumped out at Balclutha and went down a different track altogether until I ended up in road transport.

And how many brothers and sisters do you have?

I've only got one brother. Alan, my brother, he's six years younger than me, and he lives in Mosgiel, [Cornerstone] Mosgiel, just at the back of the Taieri Bowling Club. We keep in contact all the time, more or less all the time.

What do you remember about your family home at Waipori Falls?

The one we were in at the time was a wooden house. Dad used to go down to Dunedin one day a month, and he'd stop at the Chinese greengrocer at Caversham to get fruit and tomatoes and things. He'd yabber away to the Chinaman in Chinese because he could speak Chinese. When I think I'd have been about two or three or something like that, the old Chinaman would give me a banana or an orange or something, an apricot, and I remember those sort of things. And then, we'd come back and drive up the gorge road.

The first few years mother had a pantry, I remember, and Dad must have got one of those little cases of tomatoes. I don't remember what happened to me, but I was told many years

later that Mum must have left the door open and I crawled in and tried, I took a bite out of every tomato, but I don't remember getting a hiding for it for or anything like that.

When I was five I went to the Waipori Falls school. I think there was about 20 going to the school at that stage. First day at school the teacher, I remember the teacher fellow, it was a fellow called Les Hercus, and he was quite a good fellow, I felt. And then after a few days I found out that he played hockey for New Zealand. He was a New Zealand hockey rep. He was one of my teachers in those early times, and I remember him being real good. And then in later years, many later years, they lived in Caversham. And when he died, I went to his funeral.

Those early years Dad had a dog, always had a dog, a brown retriever or something, and they put a wire up and it would run along on the wire. And he always had a bit of a garden up the back.

On race day they used to go to [??] and I would go over and compete with the Woods Boys — three Enrights and the three Woods. Pick up beer bottles, a penny each you get for them.

On the odd occasion the car would break down at Lawrence on the way home. I know one night he broke a stub axle just out of Lawrence, so we had to get Peter Good? or somebody come along and he took us back into Lawrence. And Peter didn't have an axle so we ended up with another car to get home. All those sorts of things used to happen, but that was earlier times.

Once I got a bit older, nine and 10 or 11, I could run a bit, used to be fairly fit, jumping up and down the hills, and I used to go down to the Taieri Sports. I used to go to Berwick [Henry?] and Momona, Outram. Not so much then, but I used to win those races later on when the sports were at Berwick and I was about 15 or 16, I could win, win the one hundred or two hundred yards. I got a pound, I got a pound for winning a hundred yards and a pound for winning the 200 yards.

So what did your father do?

Well, Dad was, when he come back from the war, he was really — of course, I didn't know anything about it, I found out much later that he'd been to the war. The war really knocked the hell out of him. He was very, very lucky to even get home, I believe, because he lay out on the, he went ashore at Gallipoli on his 24th birthday with a hail of bullets coming down from the Turks. And the fella beside him got a bullet right in his forehead and just fell over backwards in the boat. Unfortunately, I don't know who it was. I never ever asked him and he never told me who it was, and people keep asking.

And then he [Forbes Knight's father] only lasted an hour or two, or maybe a day or two. He was going up Shrapnel Valley and some Turk shot him and then they shipped him off and got him down to a barge and out to a hospital ship and away to England. He was away for 11 months and then they disbanded the Otago Mounted Rifles and he changed to the 15th howitzer battery and went to the Somme but got blown up there. I don't know what happened. I don't know the details, but they got blown up and he lay out for about three days and nights he said. He only told me once when we were fishing at Luella. One night he

said that he'd lain out and he said, I was on my last gasp when the stretcher bearers found me.

But anyway, Dad went up the Waipori to the power station. I don't know how jobs were in those days, but he was to get the Greenstone block at Glenorchy. That's where I'm from. I'm trying to get back up there with somebody. It's all owned by the Maoris, I believe, nowadays. But anyway, he had to turn it down and that's when he went up, in 1921, he went up the Waipori, the Falls, to the power station. He had lived at Waipori itself, but when he came back after the war he got up there.

I always had a bit of a laugh about it because we went over and shifted him. We'd shifted here in 1954 to this little truck business here at Millers Flat, and got a ring from him. He'd been there 35 years and he said, oh, we we've gone to a place in Dunedin. So I went over in the car and had a look, and come back and I said, oh, you wanted this and this and this. We only had small trucks in those days, so I'm going to need two canopies to do it. So that's what happened. George Beal and I went over early in the morning and loaded them up and shifted them to Dunedin. But I always had a laugh about those remarks. When he went to Waipori Falls in 1921, he went with one suitcase. When he shifted it took two trucks, two small trucks with canopies on, to take all the furniture and bits and pieces that he'd accumulated up. Plus, plus wood and coal — that had to go too.

Now we can ask a question about you and your life. So where did you get married?

We got married in Balclutha in May 1955. You just have to go back a bit because in 1949, I'd worked for John A at the bottom of the gorge, and him and I had bit of a disagreement over the wages. Only getting a few bob a week. And then I went and worked for the DCC [Dunedin City Corporation] at Waipori Falls for a year.

And then Bert O'Brien's uncle said, why don't you come down to Ocean Beach and work here? You'd get more in three months in than you will for the whole year. So anyway, we decided in the finish, so Mum packed my suitcase up. We were in Bert O'Brien's car heading to Ocean Beach, and we got to Balclutha and I said to Bert I'm not going any further. Just on the spur of the moment. I don't there was any other reason. I just thought, no, no, I'm not. I said, pull up here and he said, what? So he stopped and I said, I'm not going anywhere. I'm not going Bert. But he couldn't just do, I think he was standing there, sitting there with me on the steering wheel with his mouth open, wondering what the hell was next.

Anyway, I got out and he got the case out and then I'm standing about, I was aged 17 then, and standing on the street. Well, what am I gonna do now? So I knew round on the main street there was the, well now I can't remember the name, but the hotel on the main street, next to the car place there. There was a car repair shop and they used to sell a few cars. And anyway, I went in and said who I was. And they said, they popped me up in the other [day] and I said In the morning of, and I, George Finshon would found out his name and he said, well go round to the Clutha Power Company, round to, he told me where it was just opposite the railway station and I started at Balclutha.

So around there he took me for a drive on a left-hand drive Chev truck, army truck, ex army truck, up the back of the yard at the post office, Balclutha post office, back down, and he

said, oh, you'll be right. So he took me around the railway yard and, and we were unloading lime and bags of super and god knows what. Well I wasn't driving a truck around in those first couple of weeks, but I eventually graduated onto a Roadstar Austin or a small Chev or something or other.

So, but anyway, those years were pretty good at Balclutha, once I got used to it a bit. And then about six months later, I'd already been up the way to the top of the mountain and brought a load of stuff down to Finnegan, a load of lambs. And I saw a black and white car sitting at the gate and I thought, well, I might be in a bit of trouble here 'cause I didn't have a heavy traffic licence.

And, anyway, it was Laurie Wright was his name, and Jimmy came out. He had the squeaky voice: "Yeah. He said there's a joker here wants to see you". I said rightie-oh, yeah, well, I said, well, I'm here. And Laurie came over anyway. And he said, uh oh, you've been driving for a while, 'cause he said, I've seen you around in the truck. And he said, have you got a heavy traffic licence? And I thought to myself, well, do I say yes or no? And I thought, well, I said, no I haven't, Laurie. And he said, oh, we better take you for a drive.

So anyway, the truck was there with the shitload on it, so I had to up back into the same place, where I'd been with Jimmy about six months previously at the post office there, just backed in there back and he said no, he said, you're all right, because he said, I've seen you around driving. So that was how I got my heavy traffic licence and I diverted then eventually into road transport.

And that was when you come to Millers Flat. And how long were you in business here for?

Well I did about five years at the Clutha Carrying Company with Herbie and then Jim Lawson; they were the bosses in those days. And then Herb shifted to Milton and started up a truck or two there. But anyway, I still carried on at the Clutha Carrying Company, and then there was an opportunity arose to come up here to a small country place here in Millers Flat we'd heard about it. So at this stage, Roy [Tosh?] who had worked for Pelletts at Clydevale, he had, he had arrived down at work and, and anyway, I met him at the gate one morning coming down at the Clutha Carrying Company. So anyway, he'd worked there for a good while.

One interesting thing we did there were we were sent out to [Warripah?] to cart 200 ton of bagged super up to Carterhope, which was Cross's farm just south of Balclutha. And those bags — everybody laughed at me. Those bags were 12 bags to the ton, and they were real heavy I can tell you. It's not like all bulk stuff, they were bags and we just hurtled them into the railway trucks. We had to cart 200. Oh, it took us about three days; we didn't all do it one day. Everything up to Carterhope.

And one day there, one of fellas that worked at Carterhope said make sure you come — my wife's got some lunch for you. So we went in. Roy had gobbled his down and he said, I'll get way back down. And I said, well Roy, I'm, I'm not ready yet. I said, when you're working like a horse, I said, you've got to eat like one. So he rifled back down and by the time I got there, he was half loaded so I got him a hand to load and he helped me though. But, yeah, that was hard work.

And after that we, there was this business come up and there was a bit of to-ing and fro-ing and it was too dear and we didn't have any money. And I had a few pennies; that's about all I had. Anyway, in the finish, I borrowed a few 500 dollar lots — 500 pound lots — off some of my workmates, Bob Telfer and a few of the others, and my uncle at Oamaru Ken McLeod and a few others lent us a bit of money and we scraped up enough to get going and shifted up here in 1954. About August 1954 we shifted to Miller Flat and started up Miller Flat Carrying Company. That lasted 31 years.

Getting back to Grace when you got married, so what was her maiden name?

Grace Elizabeth Munro. Yes. Well, that was quite interesting because I didn't have any girlfriends and, and I was boarding [??] after being at the hotel. They got me some board. I was there with them and then they decided they would shift to Timaru, but we'll get you somewhere. So, anyway, I had to find Alan, Alan Auguston, and they said, oh, you'll find it around the tennis court. So I went around the tennis court and saw Alan, and I also spied this girl playing down there, there, and I, oh, I wonder who that is. Anyway, a few weeks later, I managed to find out it was Grace Munro.

So anyway, in those days her father was pretty keen on deer stalking and that, so we used to get up the [blues?] and all those sorts of things, and there was petrol rationing. Oh well, I didn't have any coupons, but anyway, somehow, somehow or another from somewhere I might know the answer, he got a bit of petrol and away we went up the [blues?] in the car and back just enough to get up there and back again.

And, that sort of started off a bit of a [?]. Anyway I found out she was Grace Munro Yeah, she was quite, quite in the arts and pretty good at netball. Very good at tennis. Far too good for me. So, anything one thing led to the other one. You know, I was playing for Crescent. I didn't play for Clutha I ended up at the Crescent Club because I'd gone down to Pickens at the island.

And, I said to Jack one day, you gonna play rugby? Oh yeah. But he worked at the Kai dairy factory. And he said, I've got to work Saturday morning. He said, I'll have to play for Crescent. I said, oh, well you play for Crescent. I'll play. I might as well play for Crescent.

But a lot of people think I went to Kai School. No, I did not. And I didn't live in Kaitangata. I lived up the island at Mrs Carney's farm and Al Picken and Mrs Picken. In those days, that was about 1950, they had come from the Orkney Islands, which is away at the top of Scotland. And the Pickens were nice and I was with them for four years.

How many children did you have?

Well we had three. Rosalyn, the oldest girl, gosh, she's 68 now. Richard, who's about 64, and Gillian, who's 62. So two girls and the one boy.

And you've got a few grandchildren as well?

Oh, there's a few grandchildren, mostly all girls. There are two at Browns there and at Milton. Simon's got two girls; they're at Clyde. Adam's got one girl, and that's from Christchurch. So there's five girls. That's not much good in the rugby field.

And on the rugby side of it, Richard obviously played a record number of games for Otago and was an Otago captain. And Adam followed in his footsteps, didn't he?

Yeah. Oh, he played a lot of games and it cost him a lot of money too, and it cost me a lot of time and a lot of money as well. And then he went away to Ireland. He didn't have any money left so he went away to Ireland. He was sending, he got pretty well paid from over there, but they could only, there was a maximum, I think. Not sure of the exact figure, but they used to send back every month. They would send, there was a bank in Roxburgh in those days and he'd send back so many punts a month. That was the money, the punt. It'd come back, you know, when things were a lot better, especially after the Second World War.

One thing we did, when I was going back to Waipori Falls, just after the Second World War or during the Second World War, I was tracking possums. There was possums everywhere because they were getting on the roof of the house and they'd slide down the roof down to the gutters and there could be 10, 20 or 30 of them. And they'd keep you awake all night. And I said to Dad one night, can't we do something with these possums? Oh, he said, well, trap them. So he had a lot traps and we just set them around the house. We didn't have to go anywhere; they were all there. But, that first year, I think would be just after the war so maybe about 1945, we caught 1,300 possums in the vicinity of the Waipori Falls Village. We didn't have to go very far for them. I can remember one, there was one great big one. I used to spin them all, tack them, tack the hides out and then leave the tails and then just split them down later on. What they were worth with the tails, I have no idea. But this big possum from there I took it down to Dalgety's one day and I got one pound, eight and threepence for it.

We used to do a lot of duck shooting and fishing. We used to go fishing over to the different places. All those sort of things.

You obviously enjoyed your outdoor life with duck shooting and deerstalking and possuming as you've mentioned. What other things did you do outside of family and business life? Like I know you're a member of the RSA and I know you're keen on bowls as well.

There was more after we'd shifted to Miller's Flat, it was pretty hard going. The first few we were left a gravel contract, from Ettrick up to the Wilden Runs Road at Moa Flat. It had no gravel on it at all — it was just a clay road when we came here. I read about this gravel. What happened was that we had some old board vee eights and they'd boil their heads off in the heat of the day. So we had to start early in the morning and then work at night. And anyway one of them has gone up one day and he stripped the, all the teeth off the crown wheel. We rang the Ford Motor Company in the morning and they sent us a new diff up, and it had to be Johnny Pringle, who was the mechanic. He pulled the diff out and he said, well, you can chuck that away. They charged us 140 pounds. Well, we didn't have 140 pounds. So anyway, I put this diff in and about eight days later we did another one and same thing: stripped all the teeth cleaned off, and I said that's enough of that with these old trucks.

But I rang [??] at Edievale and said we're in the cart. I said, can you lend us a diff? And he said, what did they charge you for the diff in Dunedin — 140 pounds, oh he said the rotten Bs. He said they should have known about you being just started. He said, you get a tractor diff for 70 pounds, exactly the same for half the price. So for about five years we had this argument going with the Ford Motor Company in Dunedin over this diff. We'd paid them 140 pounds. I said you've already been paid. But in the finish, they kept sending the bills so one day I said, send the bloody money down [?].

What got us started here was a couple of things. What made us come here in the first place was because Laurie Brady had got a licence from any point in the Tuapeka County to Burnside. You see we couldn't only go to Lawrence in those days. You couldn't go to Dunedin, just jump in and go to anything like that. But this licence, when I read it carefully, I thought would be from the Tuapeka County — in the Teviot Riding, which was Miller Flat, Roxborough area. No, it wasn't. It was from anywhere in the Tuapeka County. And we could do it any day. You could work Christmas Day, Boxing Day, Good Friday and that sort of thing. And that's what convinced us to come here because it was all rabbits. There wasn't that many sheep, or lambs, or cattle for that matter.

And we built our own cattle crate. We had a good welder, Donald Gilmore was his name. We built our own cattle crate and did our own sheep crates for a while, once we got started. Eventually the rabbits, they had rabbit boards go and get rid of the rabbits for a year or two. And then, of course once they got rid of rabbits there was more sheep went on, and then there was more fertilizer.

The other main part of it was we had two trucks working on the Roxborough dam. And that was 12 hours a day, seven in the morning to seven at night, carting up the head tower from the big screening plant, the Fulton Hogan screening plant down on the gravel there below the dam. And that really got us started because we were getting consistent money each week, from the government, carting up the head tower, so 12 hours a day.

So one final question for you. Tell me a little bit about your grandfather and what he did at Waipori.

Well, W E S Knight, William Edward Short [Knight]. Yes, I've got a lot of history of his.

He had a gold mine up here at the south end of Roxborough, as I've found, we've found out, just at the bottom end of ... they've got a golf course there now ... down there somewhere.

And then they came here to Millers Flat in 1860. They must have been at [??]. They come up here with Cottons, I would say a horse and dray or something, and a ton of flour, so that leads you to believe that they were bakers by trade, and, they went up here just about a mile up from Millers Flat on the Teviot side. They were only here two years because we've tried to find some record of them being here or something there, but we haven't found anything. They were beside a wee creek and that leads you to believe that they were bakers, and of course they'd need water for baking if they were making scones because there was quite a few dredges on the river at that stage. And I would say they're baking for the people that worked on the dredges and that sort of thing.

But they were only here two years, because they went back down to Lawrence, or I'm not sure about that. But then of course they went to Waipori after that.

But just go back a bit to the Waitahuna Valley where a wee fella, he was Sydney William Knight, he got drowned. I believe that he was buried in the Waitahuna cemetery but we can't find any record of it. So just what happened I don't know. But that's where Dad got his name, because the previous one had fallen in the water hole at the Waitahuna Valley

Anyway, leaving on from that, they went over to Waipori and got into gold mining. I've got quite a lot of records here in the book about how much gold they got. And I've got my father's 1914 diary, and quite a few days they got quite a number of ounces of gold.

Once they built a dam up in Norwest Creek, which I've got lots of photos of and been there several times. It's called Knight's Dam, you can find it on Google, I think, and all this sort of thing. They did sluicing down on the flat in those days, before the lake ever came up. I've seen the notes where they did 15 days sluicing and they got a hundred ounces of gold. So that would be a lot of money in those days, because I understand that gold was four pound 10 shillings an ounce in those days, not like it is at the moment, \$6,000. That would be a lot of money for them, a hundred ounces of gold at four pound, 10.

Forbes, thank you very much for your time. That was very informative and a nice snapshot of the Knight family and your life. Thank you very much and we'll call it quits there.