

# Life in Southland

## Leaving Home

W.H. Mills

1. On the 28<sup>th</sup> March 1905; Bob Russell and myself left Studholme Junction on our working trip to Southland. We left Studholme by the 12.30 express and landed in Dunedin about 5pm. We bustled about in Dunedin and secured beds for the night and after having our tea which we were quite ready for we lit our pipes and went out for a stroll. That night we went to the theatre and had a very good time. We slept well that night at least I know I did because I was tired of the train but no good being tired yet we had not gone half our journey. We thought we would make the best of it and see a little of Dunedin while ----- there so we stopped there for another day. -----the museum and around the gardens ----- as nothing compared to Christchurch ----- tram cars and managed to -----now I thought Dunedin-----at nights with the-----on the hill at-----next morning

2. Justice to a good dinner we set out to look for work. So to save further trouble we went to the Registry Office and got a job which cost us 7/6 each. Bob was to go to Centre Bush to work on Devery's flax mill and I was to go to Waimatua. So being anxious to get out of town we soon started for the job The train I had to go by went first so Bob had the pleasure of seeing me away and I often used to think of Bob and the parting at the Invercargill Railway Station.

At Work.

I arrived at Waimatua and went up to Phillipon's house. I knocked at the door and a small dirty looking woman came out. I handed her the letter that I got from the Registry Office and she told me to come inside which I soon did. I put my things blankets and port Sammy into a room and then sat down to wait for the boss to come in I did not have to wait long. He soon came in and we shook hands and very soon -----ersation and I told him that ----- had just come down from----- . The table was then laid for tea-----plate of ham and eggs-----ppointed when I saw a ----- of porridge and a big ----- in front of me after s (?)etting ----- took to the -----

3. and butter determined to make a meal as best I could After tea I got an old gun and some cartridges and went out to have a shot at the rabbits which were very plentiful. I got eight rabbit skins and the legs of my trousers full of biddy-bids which took me nearly an hour to clean off. I went to bed early that night but when I was in bed I could not sleep I started thinking about home and wondering how Bob was getting along Finally I got of to sleep and slept sound with sweet dreams for the first night in Waimatua. The boss was great in the firewood trade and I soon got used to my work and the skinny old moles that I had to drive. They were a disgrace to the country. However I stopped for two months at this rough and ready place where I got fed on bread and butter and sometimes a change to butter and bread. I soon discovered that there were no chairs and all the cooking utensils they had were two camp ovens a kettle and a little pot with a hole in the side and no handle on it and I thought that a man who could not furnish his home could not pay wages which I soon found out to my sorrow. One day I was sent to town and while going to the station I thought of Bob and when I would see him again. I had just got back to Phillipson's that night when in walks Bob

4. himself: He had left Devery's and came to Waimatua to look for me and arranged a surprise party with the boss for me when I came home from town: So we arranged to go bush whacking for Phillipson and after securing a house to live in we started on the following week. We cut about thirty cord of wood and are not paid for it yet and I don't think we ever will be That game would not do as we heard that the boss was going through the court, so we done two days digging each for Bill Phillips one of our neighbours and got a sack of potatoes for wages. After that we stumped an acre of land for Ted Roberts the Waimatua millionair and we worked pretty hard for our money after that work seemed very scarce and we were idle for two weeks. We rambled about for work but were not successful. I applied for a bush section but lost at the ballot hard luck again. We struck work at last: to stump and clear an acre of bush land for Mr O'Neil at Tisbury about three mile from Waimatua and four mile from Invercargill So after a good bit of chopping, digging, and gelignite blasting we managed to clear the acre After that I had to say good – bye to one of the best mates that ever a man could work with. Bob's luck had changed. He got the offer of a job at Lake Te Anau: Ten shillings

## Good-bye Bob

5. a day. I had the day off and went in to Invercargill to see Bob and Bill Phillips (who was going to) away. That day and night I shall never forget I only felt properly tired but once yet and it was that night I was for eleven hours in the town, on my legs nearly all the time. I went out to the dance at Tisbury that night and waited there till two o'clock next morning and I thought as I tried to walk home that I would have to camp on the road or in the bush The night was as dark as pitch and the bush is a real nice place on a dark night: Lovely scenery; when you get inside and look at yourself with a light after rolling off the tram lines two or three times. I did not look at my clothes that night. I had hardly time to close my eyes before I was asleep. I put in about a week by myself and then two Tasmanians were put on at the job: Arthur Purdy and Tom Pearson. Tom stopped for three days and Arthur Purdy stopped for three weeks and once more I am left on my ace. One Sunday morning I had the misfortune to accidentally swallow a half-crown: On the next week the following piece appeared in the Southland paper:-  
"A young man eighteen years of age was admitted into the Southland Hospital: he having swallowed a half-crown: the coin was located in his stomach by means of the ExRays, He will be operated upon" -- I was for a week in the Invercargill Hospital and once more I got on board the express train bound for home
6. away from this God forsaken South. I was two weeks in the Timaru Hospital and to my knowledge I have carried the coin for over eighteen months now and am never troubled with it.

## Willowbridge

After a few days' spell from returning home I had the offer of work at Willowbridge for Mr T. Fletcher. So after doing nine weeks work we started harvesting at one shilling an hour and found. Early in April brought the harvest to a close; and once more I am packing up for another shift; this time going north.

## Blenheim

I left Studholme Junction on April 10<sup>th</sup> 1906 by the mid-day express and landed in Lyttelton about half past five, and got a ticket for Wellington by the s.s. "Mararoa," which left Lyttelton a little after six p.m. and arrived in Wellington about six a.m. next morning I had a look around Wellington for a few hours and at noon the same day I was

sailing out of the Wellington Harbour on board the s.s. "Ngunguru" to cross the Cook Straits bound for Blenheim. It was a great relief to me when the "Ngunguru" crossed the Wairau Bar having then two hours sailing in smooth water before reaching Blenheim. At about nine p.m. I had the pleasure of meeting my brother (whom I had not seen for over two years)

7. on Levin's No 1 wharf. After having supper and a walk round Blenheim we retired for the night but not much sleep we were too busy changing the two years' history for sleep. My second night in Blenheim (April 12<sup>th</sup>) I had the pleasure of walking home with two young ladies of that town. On Easter Monday (April 16<sup>th</sup>) I also had the pleasure of taking a young lady to the Picton Regatta, so that, considering I was a stranger in a strange place I was not going too slow.

I was not long in finding work in Marlborough and on April 19<sup>th</sup> I started working for Mr B. Sutherland. Farmer. At Grovetown four mile out of Blenheim I worked here until December 13<sup>th</sup> 1906. It was then my Christmas holiday started so I made up my mind to take a bike ride down home and spend Christmas there.

Cycling from Blenheim to Studholme Junction 400 miles

So I left Blenheim between half past four and five o'clock on the Thursday morning and reached Seddon half an hour behind the coach. Flaxbourne twenty minutes ahead of the coach: Reached Kekerangu at 11: a.m: quarter hour before the coach Kaikoura at 6p.m. Left Kaikoura next morning at 6 a.m. Walked six (6) miles in the Conway river bed between

8. 11 a.m. and 12 a.m. reached Cheviot in a thunderstorm about 1: 30 p.m. and was delayed for the remainder of the day Left Cheviot next morning (Saturday) at 5 a.m. crossed the Hurunui at 6:30 a.m. had breakfast at an accomodition house at 8 a.m. dinner at Woodend at 12.30 --- arrived in Christchurch about 1.45pm or 2 p.m. and spent the rest of the day at the Exhibition Left Christchurch again at 5:30 a.m. Sunday morning with still 140 miles between myself and home. Had dinner at Ashburton and tea at Temuka met my brother about 18 miles from home. I succeeded in covering the 140 miles and reached home about 8 p.m. (with still a kick in me) just in time for supper. I covered the 400 miles without a puncture breakdown or spill of any kind. In less than a fortnight I had to return to Blenheim for the harvest and by train and steamer my brother and myself arrived in Blenheim on the 29 of December 1906. We went

to Picton on New Year's day and started harvesting at my old place (for Mr B. Sutherland) on the second of January 1907. After harvest I started ploughing for another season with the team.

On December sixth (6) 1907 I started in company with Mr Fred Wells of Blenheim to cycle through to Christchurch from Blenheim and, after a bit of hard riding we arrived in Kaikoura about three o'clock in the afternoon. The next day was our heaviest day's work but we succeeded in catching to train at Domett

9. at half past two in the afternoon and trained into Christchurch this being a very good record from Blenheim to Christchurch in two days This was my second trip along this road and I am not anxious to cycle over it again. In Christchurch I trained F. Wells for bike racing; he rides well and rode some very good finishes at the sports on December (16) sixteenth From Christchurch I took the train to Studholme Junction in order to have Christmas at home. On Boxing day (December 26) I cycled from Studholme Junction to Temuka a distance of forty miles and put in the day with F. Wells in Temuka and arrived in Christchurch with the last express that night; the next evening I got on board the Rotomahana at Lyttelton for Wellington and arrived there early next morning. From there I got on board the Pneguin for Picton and had the good luck to meet my brother on the same boat as he was going to Blenheim too. We landed on the Saturday evening and we both settled down to work on the following Monday; at harvest work for my same boss Mr B. Sutherland, of Grovetown, Blenheim. I have worked for him for nearly two years now and I don't think a change would do any harm. On January twenty third (23) 1908 we finished harvest at Blenheim and rolled up our swags. We caught the s.s. Pakena at Picton that night and after a good tossing about in the middle of the Straits we landed in Wellington on Friday morning.
10. On Saturday morning at about 8 o'clock we got on board the Manawatu express at Wellington and after travelling all day and up to seven o'clock in the evening we were again landed, this time at Midhirst, Taranaki. After putting in Sunday with some friends at Midhirst we returned to Wellington on Monday evening. Tuesday night saw us on board the s.s. Rotomahana for Lyttelton. We caught the mid-day express at Christchurch and arrived home about six o'clock; on the evening of January (29) twenty ninth. The next day January 30 I started harvesting at one of my old places Messers Fletcher Bros Willowbridge. Here I again

met my old mate Charles Robinson of Waimate. After putting in a fair harvest, Charley and myself started digging potatoes for Mr George Peck and Mr John Pratt of Willowbridge Here Charley and I made a deal and bought a patch of potatoes for £100 and finally came out on the winning side. After digging several small patches of potatoes for a few farmers we rolled our swags and set off for fresh toil and after having a good trip from Lyttelton in the s.s. Maori we found ourselves in Wellington one wet morning That night we went to see some boxing and put in a very enjoyable time and finally went to bed with the intention of rising early enough to catch the ten to eight train for Wanganui.

11. But that morning I shall never forget. We awoke in a hurry at twenty minutes to eight leaving us ten minutes to dress and catch the train. Perhaps we would not have woken so early only we were called for breakfast But that breakfast was not for us. We jumped out of bed both growling about the same thing and in far quicker time than any fire brigade men could have dressed we jumped into our clothes and almost flew downstairs carrying a portmanteau and an overcoat each and both of us trying to button our clothes as we ran along. On we went with our coat open, vest open, shirt open, no collar or tie on; trousers half buttoned; boots unlaced and our hats on back to front. We hadn't even time to have a wash. After running half way to the station we jumped into a cab and tried to dress ourselves a little bit more; at last we got to the station still looking as though we were pulled through a gooseberry bush and then we had a row with the porters and station master over our swags they refused to take our swags in the van and we were too late to get a ticket; the station master daring us to board the train But this did not frighten us in our determination for we were determined to reach Wanganui that afternoon; and so we stepped on the train just as the engine whistled to leave Wellington. Our first thoughts were to have a wash and get togged up a bit. Although

12. being only sons of toil we liked being togged up a little while in company or travelling. At last we found a suitable place at the end of the carriage where we could have a wash. While busy at our toilet a guard came along to collect tickets But as we didn't have any he had to supply us with one each before he could collect any from us. At last we got as far as Aramote without anything startling taking place While going from Aramote to Wanganui we got in company with a man called Bob Malcolm who was going to work on the new tram line at Wanganui.

Through the good advice of Bob we succeeded in getting a job as navvies on the tram line too; And had settled for a place to board within half an hour after landing in Wanganui After we had put in two or three days picking up the road in front of the Wanganui railway station we though we would like a change and thought this work was rather hard for nine bob a day and find yourself. After looking round for a while we secured a bush contract to scrub and fall two hundred acres of bush for Messrs Murray, Horrell, and Toswell of Piatuka. The work was at Kohakoriki one hundred and twenty miles up the Wanganui river. We very soon got together a co-operative gang which consisted of George Russell ex policeman of Wanganui Archibald Smith of Wanganui John Reid of Lyttelton. Charley and myself of South Canterbury and our first work was to write out an order of provisions and tools to start on

13.our job. So on Monday June 29 – 1908,We left Wanganui early in the morning on one of Hatricks river boats en route for Pahiamakia. We arrived at Pipiriki on Monday evening and settled down for the night at Smiths boarding house. We left again very early on Tuesday morning and had a long day on the boat without anything very exciting taking place. We arrived at the boat house in the evening but we did not bargain for spending so much cash on our journey and for every meal we had it cost us twice the ordinary price of a meal So we were supplied with hot water and we had to set to work amongst our boxes and get some tea. After tea we had to get the bed ready. We laid our blankets on the open deck against the wire netting bulwarks and had a few winks of sleep But the wind through the netting bulwarks was very sharp especially as it was winter time; we started off again next morning and had two or three hours more on the boat and then we were finally landed at Pahiamakia which was a small clearing in the bush with one maori whare or hut Our first work was to get breakfast and get our belongings up the hill and after a lot of slipping and falling over on the wet ground, we at last accomplished our task and sat down to breakfast at about eleven o'clock. Then we had to do a bit of exploring and find out where we had to work. After a lot of this exploring and loseing each other we succeeded in finding out where to start our work. But then we had to hurry back to the river and cut some pig fern for our bed for the night.

The next days, Saturday and Sunday we were busy packing our things through the bush and building a camp and on Sunday night. July 5<sup>th</sup> 1908 we had our camp ready for occupation; we put in the next day making a

few tracks and sharpening our tools read for a start. After working about a fortnight Jack Reid and Charley Robinson did not like the prospects of the job and thought they would shift on. So the other three of us were left to finish or do what we liked. All went well with us until the fifth of September Then the chimney caught fire and spread on to the fly of the galley and along to the sleeping tents We heard the explosion of a few cartridges and saw the smoke from the fire and in less time than it takes to tell, I was through the fell bush and got to the camp in time to see the sleeping tent fall down My two mates were not far behind me and we managed to save a few things and to keep the fire from the second tent which was all we had to depend on for sleeping and for everything else. We lost a lot of our provisions with the fire besides having to rebuild our camp. After that we had a week's rain and had to do all our cooking in the rain and go out and work in the rain and no place to dry our clothes at night. We built the camp again and plodded on till the beginning of December and then rolled our swags; after a lot of auctioneering we sold a lot of our tools to

the Maoris and our bushmen neighbours; Archie Smith and I started on our way back to Wanganui and left George Russell to go on the Road Survey. I can still see Archie standing in the bow of Hatricks River boat with a very long face and doubtless thinking of the many times within a few months that he had been so near to meeting his maker. I went across to him and said, "Whats the matter Archie." His answer was with a heavy sigh and, "Ah well Bill I was just thinking how lucky we were to get out of that bush alive. We had a few close shaves. Come and have a drink." And off we went to drown our troubles in a glass of ale. Archie was quite right. A bushmans life is a dangerous one. And I have known him to be in such a fix that it was only by his presence of mind that he got out alive, and he was not the only one who was pleased to get out of the bush on the same conditions