

FARMING IN THE WANGANUI DISTRICT

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THE district described in this paper lies between the Whenuakura and Rangitikei rivers and stretches inland to embrace the Ohakune, Raetihi and Taihape districts. The city of Wanganui with a population of 36,000 is the principal centre. Wanganui has a superphosphate works, a woollen mills and is a wool selling centre. The counties represented in the area are the Rangitikei, Waimarino, Wanganui, Wai-totara and part of Patea.

Climate

The rainfall varies from 30 in. in some of the coastal districts to over 60 in. in the Raetihi area. There is a large slice of country in the 30 to 40 in. rainfall bracket. It extends from Wanganui through to the other side of **Taihape**. The rainfall in Wanganui is very evenly spread throughout the year. The average rainfall for individual months is: January, 2.91; February, 2.75 ; March, 2.19 ; April, 3.10; May, 3.41; June, 3.57; July, 3.24; August 2.89; **September**, 2.39; October, 3.19; November, 2.71; December, 3.33. The amount of sunshine in Wanganui City averages out at approximately 2,100 hours. In Wanganui, late frosts can occur from May to September but usually there are only about eight frosts over the winter with the heaviest being not more than 5". In contrast, the inland town of Ohakune, at an altitude of 2,000 feet, has many frosts — some of them up to 20".

Topography

Immediately next to the coast, there is a belt of rolling sand country varying in width from 1 mile to about 6 miles. This country is light and very prone to windblows in the summer and for this reason is has to be lightly stocked in the summer months, especially in the dune formations. The sand country between the dunes is flat and low lying and this land produces very useful country for fat lamb and dairy farming. Immediately adjacent to the sand coun-

try is a belt of good country varying from 3 miles to 13 miles in width. This is the most intensively farmed soil in the district and is used for cash cropping, fat lamb farming and dairying. There is also some market gardening carried out, more particularly on the volcanic soils west of Wanganui. This belt of flat country ends abruptly and from there inland the hill country takes over. For the most part this hill country is steep with a soil type varying from soft mudstone (blue papa) through sandy mudstone to fairly hard sandstone. In the Waimarino county this hill country merges into the flat country of the central plateau of the North Island. This plateau, on which Raetihi and Ohakune are situated, ranges from 1,700 feet to 2,200 feet in elevation. Derived from volcanic ash showers it is free draining and very easy to cultivate. It is a fertile soil and has an adequate summer rainfall and is very suitable for market gardening. A proportion of the land is therefore devoted to market gardening but for the most part fat lamb farming is practised and also some dairying. The winters are hard in the Raetihi-Ohakune area and the provision of winter feed for stock is much more important than on the lower central country.

Size of Holdings

The average size of holding throughout the district is 750 acres.

Sheepfarming

With the average size of holding 750 acres, it will be apparent that sheepfarming is the main type of farming. The primary reason for this is that most of the country is hilly; a secondary reason is that a big slice of the territory falls within the 30 to 40 in. rainfall bracket. The even spread of rainfall throughout the 12 months of the year makes the Wanganui region a very stable area in which to farm. There is very seldom any need to transport stock out of the district because of drought conditions. When the occasional dry period occurs in December or January a quickening of killing at the local freezing works is sufficient to lighten up the stock on the farms in order to eke out feed supplies until rain falls. A well-distributed rainfall also helps to reduce soil erosion. A good cover of grass on the hills over the summer and autumn reduces the run-off should unduly heavy rain fall early in the autumn. Generally, the Wanganui area is less troubled by erosion than

many districts in New Zealand. A well-distributed rainfall has many advantages but it has one disadvantage in that it provides an ideal medium for weed growth. Manuka, gorse and variegated thistle have for a great number of years been a headache to sheepfarmers. Gorse has been a particularly bad weed on the coastal hill country of the Wanganui and Waitotara counties on both the shady and sunny faces of the hills. Prior to the introduction of the bulldozer and hormone weedkillers, it was a long and arduous task to clear a farm out of gorse and consequently most of the gorse country remained that way. With the advent of giant discs, crawler tractors and 2,4,5-T hormone in the postwar period, there has been a considerable reduction in the area occupied by gorse, more particularly on the rolling country. Much cleaning up work remains to be done on the steeper hill country.

Manuka is present over a much wider range of hill country than gorse and is present to some extent throughout all of the hill country in the region. Fortunately aerial topdressing stopped the increase of manuka. It is true that the manuka still has to be cut, but once it is cut and the area is adequately topdressed with superphosphate and sown with grass seed there is very little growth from the manuka. An initial dressing of 5 cwt per acre of superphosphate, followed by 3 cwt a year later, supports a sufficiently vigorous pasture to virtually stop any re-infestation of manuka.

Variegated thistle continues to be a recurring problem on many sheep farms and has to be regularly sprayed or dusted at least once a year. The seed of variegated thistle is viable in the ground for a very long period - upwards of 50 years — and thus annual treatment will be necessary for many years to come.

The Romney is the main breed of sheep in the district and apart from stud farms of, for instance, Southdowns, Romney ewes are the basis of most flocks. Of recent years use has been made of Border Leicester and Cheviot half-breeds and also the Perendale. Various breeds of rams are put across the Romney ewes according to the type of farming. On the flat country where fat lamb farming is practised, Southdown, Suffolk, Border Leicester, Cheviot and Hampshire Down rams are used. Of these breeds, the Southdown continues to be the most common fat lamb sire but nevertheless the other breeds have made considerable inroads into what was previously a 100% Southdown affair. This has been brought about by the fat lamb farmers' aim to get a heavier lamb (average weight 36 lb as opposed to

30 to 32 lb) without any increase in the proportion of fat.

The hill country farmers either put all the ewes to the Romney ram or a proportion to the Romney and the remainder to a fat lamb sire. Generally, putting all the ewes to the Romney is the most common practice on hill country holdings and in this case there are surplus two-tooth ewes to sell to fat lamb farmers as well as cast-for-age ewes. A large proportion of the wether Romney lambs are fattened. It has been estimated that 40% of the fat lamb kill at the Wanganui Freezing Works are straight out Romney bred. The fat lamb kill at the Wanganui Works approximates half a million. This is not all of the district's fat lamb kill — lambs are also killed at Patea, Feilding and Waitara. The total number of sheep in the district is 3½ million and of these 2¼ million are breeding ewes. Associated with this sheep population of 3½ million are 280,000 beef cattle. These beef cattle are fairly evenly distributed throughout the district with the exception that their numbers are restricted on the sandstone hill country. This is because there are many steep gorges on the sandstone country. Farmers do not like to carry too many cattle because of losses over the gorges.

Dairying

There are 30,000 dairy cows scattered throughout the area. Of these, approximately 2,000 supply milk for the city of Wanganui.

Dairying has been on the decline over the past few years owing principally to a swing towards sheep farming. In 1958 there were 35,000 cows in milk in the area compared with 30,000 in 1964.

Mixed farms that previously carried both dairy cows and sheep have tended to become straight sheep farms and some of the smaller dairying units of 40 to 45 cows have been bought out by neighbouring sheep farmers.

At present, there are signs that this downward trend in cow numbers may have been arrested. Tanker supply has come into parts of the district and this has resulted in more cows being milked on farms supplying the tanker. Without pigs to look after, the farmer has more time for feeding and managing the herd and this is reflected in an increase in the number of cows carried.

Dairying is carried out on quite a wide variety of flat country soil types throughout the district but there is a tendency for it to be more concentrated on the heavy alluvial soils of the valleys, particularly so when the herd

is on factory supply. The town milk herds are situated more on the free-draining soil types because of relative freedom from pugging during the winter months. There are three cheese factories and four butter factories in the district.

Cash Cropping

The Wanganui-Rangitikei is one of the main cash cropping area of the North Island. The three main cash crops are wheat, barley and potatoes. The wheat and barley crops are all spring sown-wheat in September and barley in October. If the ground is unduly wet in the spring, there is a tendency for less wheat and more barley to be sown. There are 4,000 acres of wheat grown with an average yield of 40 to 45 bushels and 3,000 acres of barley with an average yield of 55 to 60 bushels.

Potatoes, known in the trade as Rangitikei potatoes, are grown on the free-draining loam soils of the Marton-Hunterville area. Rangitikei potatoes supply the North Island market from February to May. Potatoes are also grown in the Ohakune district. In all, about 1,700 acres of commercial potatoes are grown, 1,400 in the Rangitikei and 300 at Ohakune.

Conclusion

The Wanganui area has been one of the important sheep farming regions of New Zealand and there is no doubt that it will continue to play an even more important role in this direction. There will be steady increases in the carrying capacity of hill country farms. The reliable summer rainfall will enable beef breeding herds to remain an important source of income on hill country. Increasing emphasis will also be placed upon grain growing and cash cropping in general on the heavy "good" country of the lowland belt. The Waimarino plain is likely to remain in the role of a vegetable-supplier to the Wellington and Auckland markets in addition to being a concentrated area for fat lamb production.
