

PRESS CUTTING

Publication: Northland Age
Circulation: 4,410
Date: 14 March 2019
Client: TIP Pilot
Pages: 1

POLITICS, SCIENCE AND A LOVE STORY

By Peter Heath

Family politics, a 120-year-old love story and modern day research to see if native wood can be harvested sustainably for commercial use converged in an historic church at Matauri Bay.

The iconic Samuel Marsden Māori Anglican Church is dedicated to the memory of Rev Samuel Marsden, whose early missionary success can in part be attributed to chief Ruatara, who provided him with a safe place to rest at Matauri. Marsden then sailed on to hold the first official New Zealand church service at Rangihoua, in the Bay of Islands, on Christmas Day, 1814.

The final step in the renovation of the 123-year-old church was a service of thanksgiving for a wooden floor made from tōtara harvested on the Kaero farm of John McGee.

In 2015 Melanie Chandler-Winters, a member of the Whangaroa Pastorate, spoke with John about the floor. Her concern was that particle board had been laid in place of the native timber, which the church could not salvage during restoration. John revealed that he was harvesting tōtara on his farm as part of a study.

This was the Tōtara Industry Pilot (TIP), a two-year assess-

ment of whether a business case exists for a new Northland industry based on the sustainable management of farmed tōtara. A small group of mostly Northland-based interests was driving the study. Current TIP partners include the Northland Tōtara Working Group, Tane's Tree Trust, Te Taitokerau Māori Forestry Collective, Northland Inc, Scion (New Zealand Forest Research Institute Limited) and Te Urū Rakau.

A decision was made to use some of the tōtara from John's farm for the floor of the church. Over a number of months the church and the TIP steering group worked together to mill and finish the timber and install the floor.

It is fitting, given the tōtara was harvested only 20 minutes from the church, that the new floor is TIP's first demonstration of sustainably harvested native timber from Northland.

The floor was blessed by Reverends Kevin Herewini and Wasine Stewart, in the presence of members of the Anglican Church Pastorate and Reverend Canon Arthur Hokianga, of the Anglican Diocese.

Also in attendance were Ngati Kura kaumatua Nau Epiha, other members of the Matauri Bay community, and



Samuel Marsden Māori Anglican Church, ready for another century after renovations.

representatives from the TIP partner organisations including Shane Jones, Minister of Forestry and Minister of Regional Economic Development; the head of Te Urū Rakau (Forestry NZ) Julie Collins; Paul Quinlan, of the Northland Tōtara Working Group; Peter Berg, chairman of the TIP steering group and Tane's Tree Trust; Pita Tipene, chairman of Te Tai Tokerau Māori Forestry Collective; David Wilson, of Northland Inc; and Arron Judson, general manager of marketing and partnerships at Scion.

The McGee family's bitter-sweet connection with the church stretches back to the early 1890s, and involves young love, the racial divide of the day, family politics, and an unexpected reunion, with TIP unwittingly at the centre.

Mr McGee's great-grandfather, also called John, was a whaler and gumdigger who lived among the Māori of Matauri Bay, learned to reo and married Harata (Charlotte) Tame in 1895.

Harata died three years later, at the age of 24, and is now buried in the churchyard, next to her mother.

Great-grandfather McGee

then married again.

His first union was never openly discussed in his new family, and his living descendants had little information about his connection to Harata.

But this story has not ended, thanks to an entirely unexpected twist. Unknown to Mr McGee, Harata's namesake from another branch of the Tame family, Harata Toms, is a current member of the church's congregation. Whether by chance or divine intervention, the families met only when organisers came together to plan the thanksgiving service, to the great delight of all involved.

Mr McGee, Ms Toms and other members of both families were also at the ceremony.

"This story typifies the way that Northland communities are still brought together and bonded by the unique natural resources of the region," Mr Judson said. "We think the region will be interested to see this beautiful native timber being used in home furnishings and interiors again, and to learn that the economic returns from tōtara are potentially significant, many times the value of Pinus radiata."

Mr Tipene said the TIP project was also looking at the cultural and regional values associated with sustainably-managed and farmed tōtara.

"There is old and new knowledge that is distinctly Northland, locked up in our local and regional communities — skills, ideas about forestry and uses for timber and wood. We're thinking about the development of our mokopuna and what our land can sustain when we consider a future tōtara industry. So far we're encouraged by the results," he added.

Northland was selected for the TIP project as it has an unusually large resource of naturally regenerated tōtara on farmland, the right weather and geographic attributes to support tōtara growth, the necessary infrastructure in terms of drying kilns and mills, and proximity to the high-value timber markets of Auckland.

Regenerating farm tōtara is fast-growing, and the wood used on the church floor came from trees that were, on average, 80 years old. That is young for a tōtara, which can live for hundreds of years. The range in colouring is a feature of young tōtara.



Flowers for Charlotte (Harata) McGee and her mum.
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