



A child's life on Uretara Island in the 20th century – memoirs of Leo Ducker

Leo Ducker was the first pākehā child to be born at Ōhiwa, on 24 June in 1906. He was the fifth child of seven, and was born prematurely to his mother, Lily Eyes, while his father, Frank Ducker, was away at sea working as a steward on ships travelling between Auckland and Australia.

A local Māori woman delivered Leo in the unpainted shed on the hill behind Ōhiwa that was the Ducker home. Lily was not able to feed Leo and so a Māori wet nurse was found to feed him. Leo graduated to Highlander condensed milk and then cow's milk when the family cow had calved and her milk came in.

In 1911, at age five, Leo started school at Ōhiwa with his classmates from the Crowther, Black, Reid and Holiway families. The children mostly rode to school across the mudflats on horses or ponies, sometimes as many as four children to a pony!

Leo's only sister, Olive, left the family to live with her grandparents and attend school in New Plymouth and only visited with the rest of her family twice, so Leo's childhood was spent mostly in the company of his brothers. The brothers would regularly play at the Ōhiwa Wharf, even though they were strictly forbidden by their parents to do this.

One day, while at play at the wharf when Leo was just five, he missed a plank and fell from the wharf down into the sea. It was lucky that Leo was wearing a large straw hat tied to his head as a local man, Mr Morrison, saw the straw hat floating towards the Ōhiwa bar. Mr Morrison dived in, swam to Leo and pushed him to shore, saving him from certain drowning. When Leo's mother and father got home that night there were 'spanks all round'!

Leo's father had purchased a 'life-long' lease of Uretara Island, in the Ōhiwa Harbour, on which he wanted to settle and farm and so the Ducker family moved to the Island when Leo was six, in 1912.

Accommodation on the Island was extremely basic, with the family home now consisting of a lean-to hut with a dirt floor, where the family cooked and ate and Leo's mum and dad slept, and two old fashioned tents where the boys slept.

In the lean-to hut was a fireplace with a corrugated iron chimney. A heavy 'camp oven' pot was used to cook food in the hot embers of the fire and billies hung on hooks over the fire, which Leo remembers virtually never went out.

Leo's eldest brothers left the Island to gain work on farms at Waiotaha, and this left Leo and his brother Cecil, aged six and seven respectively as the eldest children and therefore, a greater share of the chores.

The family's income came mainly from grazing cattle and was supplemented by the sale of cockles, butter and eggs, produced by the family's flock of 100 ducks.



Leo's chores as a six year old included helping to gather cockles, often in the cold mud and in the very early morning, so that three sacks of fresh cockles could be loaded on the boat each morning for their journey to the markets in Auckland. The boys' chores also included collecting honey, helping in the vegetable garden, feeding the ducks and chickens, fishing, floundering, churning the butter and collecting firewood.

When Leo was seven, his mother could no longer cope with life on the Island and she packed her bags and left with the youngest son, Norman, to live in New Plymouth. In Leo's memoirs he said, "it was my job to take her over to the coach and say good bye. It was the saddest moment of my life. I was only seven years old. I do not mind admitting that I cried for days."

A Governess, Mrs Turner, moved onto the Island to help care for the remaining family, but before long the First World War began and Leo's father enlisted. Before he left for the War, he married the Governess and while he was away at war, the Governess was in charge. The Ducker children suffered at her hand, and bore the full brunt of her ill feeling towards them. The duration of the War must have felt endless and lonely for the children on the Island, without their mother or father, and several of their siblings.

By the time Leo's father returned from War, Leo was nearly twelve and was able to go to school at Waingarara, which was 3.2 kilometres by boat and another 3.2 kms on foot. Also around this time, Leo's sister Olive came to visit, one of just two times that Leo saw Olive. Leo was so miserable on the Island that when Olive came to leave, he asked to go with her to New Plymouth, but was not allowed.

"When I finally said goodbye to my sister, the tears started on the way home in the rowboat and I simply bawled my eyes out. I was 12 years old and I should have been able to overcome my grief. It took a while."