

NORTHERN ADVOCATE

Maori land march - 40 years on

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Dame Whina Cooper. PHOTO/JOHN STONE

Northern Advocate

By: Mikaela Collins

Northern Advocate reporter *Mikaela Collins* writes about the historic land march led by Dame Whina Cooper, who Māori called Te Whaea o te Motu (Mother of the Nation). The event, 40 years ago, was at the forefront of a new recognition of land rights and the need to settle grievances. Last week also marked the passing of Te Hiku Claims Settlement Bill in Parliament, Dame Whina's Te Rarawa people among the four iwi involved.

The long road

Te Hapua, September 14, 1975 - 80-year-old Whina Cooper steps out along a dusty Far North road with Wellington as her destination.

The walk stemmed from concerns over the continuing alienation of Māori land. She was supported not only by the walking stick clutched in her hand but also by the rally of marchers behind her crying, "Not one more acre of land to be lost."

Whether Dame Whina knew it or not at the time, the march would change New Zealand. Monday marks 40 years since the beginning of the historic hiko.

Dame Whina's daughter, Hinerangi Cooper-Puru, 78, was 38 years old at the time. She says Maori land was still being relentlessly taken from iwi and hapu and, after talking to people from around the North, her mother realised something had to be done.

"All I can say to you is what land was left? All that was left out of all the land was 2600 acres in Maori ownership, otherwise the land was gone. The mountains, the riverbeds were taken. They'd come into your area and put a road through and you would have no say," Ms Cooper-Puru said.

The march was launched at a hui convened by Dame Whina at Mangere Marae early in 1975. Following six months of planning, the first steps on the long road were taken. Ms Cooper-Puru recalls her mother telling her she had to join the hiko.

"She said to me, 'You must come. We have to show the people my family is supportive'. I said, 'Oooh, Mum, I've got a young family, I have a job, I have a boss'. She said, 'Don't worry about it, just come'.

"My husband and I had to organise ourselves and our children and we spoke to some lovely people who were happy to help out, and we were on the road."

Although Dame Whina was 80 years old at the time, Ms Cooper-Puru says she never worried that her mother was about to embark on a 1100km journey to Wellington.

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She grew up following her mother around, watching her getting into "a scrum with the boys", watching her confidently knock at politicians' doors despite being told there were protocols to follow. Her mother was a "tough lady" who held many roles - from president of the Hokianga Rugby Union to local shopkeeper.

"Mum was very fiery and fearless. Mum used to visit me on the way back from Parliament. She used to go and see the Minister of Maori Affairs without even ringing up Mr [Ernest] Corbett.

"He used to tell her there were rules and she'd say, 'I didn't come here to see your rules. I came here to see the Minister of Maori Affairs'. She was that kind of woman."

Her mother's strength, sharp tongue and eloquence were qualities that allowed her to lead a rally of people peacefully, she said.

"My mother would say they must not shout at people, they must keep singing - so there were two songs they sang all the way, there was no shouting, only one flag and no other placards.

"They sang Ko nga waka enei, which included all the canoes, and another one Mum composed."

Although Dame Whina was not on foot for the entire journey, she would walk through every town and city and speak at every marae. The march stopped at 25 marae, gathering signatures for a Memorial of Rights, asking for all statutes that could alienate land to be repealed and for remaining tribal land be invested in Maori in perpetuity.

In front of a crowd of 30,000, the marchers would present those signatures to the Prime Minister of the day, Bill Rowling, when they arrived in Wellington. By the time the hikoi arrived on October 13, 1975, the walkers knew all the words to the songs, the group of 50 had become 5000 and 60,000 signatures had been gathered for the Memorial of Rights.

The awakening

Mrs Cooper-Puru describes the march as the "awakening of Maori".

She says it alerted not only Maori, but also Pakeha, to what was happening to Maori land and encouraged others to take a stand.

Hone Harawira, an activist-turned-politician, was a working 20-year-old at the time of the hikoi. He did not take part in the march but his mother, Titewhai Harawira, was heavily involved.

Mr Harawira describes the 1975 Maori land march as "hugely radical".

"I think for those who were alive at the time, it was part and parcel of our upbringing, our growing up, our understanding of the world. It's kind of like if you were around if the Beatles were around or Jimi Hendrix ... if you were around at the time of Jimi Hendrix you saw something in the music and the way the world was changing that you don't see any more. It was the same with that march."

The land march was the beginning of the Maori land movement, Harawira says.

Following that march, Joe Hawke led the occupation of Bastion Point in 1977 after the government announced plans for a housing development on former Ngati Whatua reserve land. Then, in 1978, Tainui land activist Eva Rickard led a sit-in protest on iwi land the government had claimed for a military airfield during World War II which later became a golf course.

Irene Cooper is the girl holding her nanny's hand in the famous photograph from the land march. She was 3 years old at the time and remembers little things, like snow on the mountaintops she called "ice-cream mountains" and women carrying their babies in kete. Now aged 43, she lives in Singapore and says she remembers the difference in what she learned about the march from whanau and what the books told her.

"The strongest thing for me was the play down of the march, that it eventuated to nothing. There was no emotion in writing but, for me, the march gave people a say. You saw people come together and a lot more people were talking about the issue. That's why people try to duplicate it."

Today if iwi haven't already settled their treaty claims, they are in the process of doing so. Last Wednesday four of five Far North Te Hiku iwi, including Dame Whina's iwi, Te Rarawa, saw the Te Hiku Claims Settlement Bill passed in Parliament.

Mr Harawira says this would not be happening if the Maori land march did not take place. "That march gave a sense to Maori that they were right to be concerned about their land."

To mark 40 years since the march, a celebration was held in Te Unga Waka Marae (in Auckland) on Sunday.