

A PIONEER'S LIFE

FIRST WHITE CHILD IN WELLINGTON CELEBRATES 80TH BIRTHDAY

The story of the early days in this dominion is an epic of courage and determination. To hear phases of it from the lips of one who was born in New Zealand in 1840, and who has lived since then continuously in the Wellington district, is both enticing and interesting. Yesterday, Mr Thomas Rodgers, of Rangitikei Line, Palmerston North, who was born where Petone now stands in the year 1840, celebrated his 80th birthday, and was visited during the day by a "Standard" reporter. In the conventional greeting under such circumstances there was little need to dissemble, for Mr Rodgers looks quite hale and hearty, and quite capable of "many happy returns". This, despite the fact that he was born on February 29th and only has a birthday once every four years. Of course, after eighty years of these protracted spaces between birthdays, the thing has lost its novelty to Mr Rodgers, but it is worthy of mention that at one period he went eight years without a celebration of his natal day. That occurred when the year 1900 intervened, which was not a leap year.

In January, 1840, his mother and father, who came from the county of Essex, landed on the Petone beach. They were supplied with a certain amount of canvas from the vessel in which they had made the voyage, and were able to erect a small shack at the fringe of the bush that reached right down to the shore. In this his parents took up their abode, and a month later the first white child to be born in the Wellington district was ushered into life. Then a month later, so great are the ironies of life on occasions, his father lost his life by drowning. A party were returning from the other

side of the harbour with a stiff "south-easter" blowing, when the craft capsized and nine of the occupants, including Mr Rodgers' father, perished - and they were all men who had just completed the voyage from England, which in those days occupied about six months and in a small sailing ship was a proceeding fraught with a considerable element of peril. Mrs Rodgers married again later, but her second venture was as ill-fated as her first, for her second husband was killed by the Maoris within two or three years. Mr Rodgers was still quite a child and has but vague memories of those very early days, but up to the age of fifteen he lived with his mother and looked after two or three cows and a garden. Affrays with the natives were of frequent occurrence in the days of his childhood, and he can call to mind times when he and his mother crouched behind the pile of big stones that formed the chimney while the men fought to sort out parties of natives.

The obvious task was bush work, and at the age of fifteen he swung his axe in the forests of the Hutt Valley now long since disappeared. In 1866 he married and lived in the Hutt Valley and later in the Wairarapa. Eventually he found his way to a tiny settlement where the town of Palmerston North now stands, and in 1888 purchased from the Government a block of 100 acres of land covered in standing bush that is now the fertile farm on which Mr Rodgers resides on Rangitikei Line.

Mrs Rodgers died in August, 1918, at the age of 78 years. Out of a family of eight children, four daughters and two sons are living.

**COPIED EXACTLY FROM THE MANAWATU EVENING STANDARD,
March 1st, 1920**