

November & December 1893

MAKOHINE DISASTER AT OHINGAITI

MONDAY 13TH NOVEMBER 1893

Extracts from the Paraekaretu Express published by Joseph Ivess. Hunterville.

Publication date Tuesday 14th November 1893.

Terrible Fatality at Makohine

FIVE LIVES LOST

An appalling calamity took place at Makohine at about 10 o'clock yesterday morning. Four children were playing under the spoil embankment made by the earth thrown out from the tunnel, when Mrs Thomas Quillinan who was in her house, close to the road, heard the trees cracking below the bank. She ran out and seeing the danger that threatened the little ones (three of which belonged to her and the other to Mrs Patrick Quillinan) rushed with maternal heroism to their assistance but it was too late, the huge mass of earth came down like an avalanche and entombed the whole five. Mrs Quillinan had almost reached a place of safety when she was overtaken and buried under the falling earth. The accident is most terrible that has happened in these parts for a very long time and has touched the hearts of the residents of Ohingaiti with awe and sympathy. Most commendable alacrity was shown by the workers all along the line, and soon a large number of navvies were at work to recover the bodies. The body of Mrs Quillinan was soon unearthed. But as the children were buried more centrally it is feared that it will be some time before they can be got at. At dinner time over 70 men were at work. These two Quillinan families were highly respected in this district and this awful catastrophe will throw a pall over the spirits of local resident for some time. An inquest will be held as soon as the bodies have been recovered.

FURTHER PARTICULARS

Under the able superintendence of Mr McGonagle about a hundred men in all were at work at the scene of the disaster an hour after the dreadful occurrence. The men at the sawmills, and those at work elsewhere hurried to render assistance and there was a continuous stream from Ohingaiti. Shovels, spades and other implements were kindly lent by the dozen by the storekeepers, and even then many men had to look on for the want of tools. As the place in which the bodies were most likely to be found was known the operations were concentrated in that direction. A cutting was made through the debris, about the centre of the road as Mr McGonagle thought that if the bodies were not found by this action, the earth on side nearest the bank could be shifted into the cutting then made. An hour's labour, however, was rewarded with success, and the body of the unfortunate woman was found. Close by her was found the body of the youngest child. As was feared they were terribly mangled, and the scene was heart-rending as a stretcher containing the remains was taken to the residence of the bereaved husband and father.

November & December 1893

The scene of the accident is a few chains on the Hunterville side of the proposed viaduct. Trolleys have been along a siding from the Makohine tunnel and the earth precipitated down the hill. This loose earth lodged against the trees lifted them roots and all, off the papa rock. Mr Leo Hanson, who tips the earth over this place, had a miraculous escape. He had just tipped over a load and was retiring when he heard a crash and returning found the outer portion of the projection which he had been standing on was carried away.

The slip covers the road for about six chains distance so it will be a day or two before regular coach communications can be arranged between Ohingaiti and Mangaonoho. The coaches yesterday had not passed when the slip occurred, so the passengers were obliged to walk to the railway station.

The unfortunate victims are Mrs Thomas Quillinan, aged 33, and her children, Hannah, aged 2 years; Tommy, aged 4 years; John aged 8 years. The other child is Popsey, aged 5 the daughter of Mr P Quillinan. Fortunately one of Mr Thos. Quillinan's children was staying with its aunt, and so escaped.

The slip did not quite reach Mrs Quillinan's house, but some trees carried down on the top of the moving mass, fell and split two or three of the boards in the wall. Mrs Quillinan, judging from position of the bodies, all but saved herself and two children as she was only about three yards from the edge of the slip, having one child by the hand and pushing the other before her.

Universal sympathy is felt with Mr. Thomas Quillinan, and the neighbours generally are expressing their sorrow by kindly acts. It is the most terrible accident that has ever occurred in the district. The inquests will be held as soon as possible, and that probably will be today, if all the bodies are recovered before night.

Makohine Calamity. – Yesterday the residents of Hunterville were awe-stricken by news of the Makohine calamity. People talked of it in low horrified tones, and those who witnessed the exhumation of the bodies of Mrs Quillinan and her children will remember it as long as they live. It is the worst calamity that has ever happened since the settlement of this locality.

Extracts from the Paraekaretu Express published by Joseph Ivess.

Hunterville. Friday, November 17th, 1893.

The Late Disaster

People of Ohingaiti and those living near the scene of the late catastrophe are strong in their condemnation of the authorities for the want of discretion shown in connection with the depositing of the waste material from the Makohine cutting. At the inquest held at Ohingaiti it had been shown that the immense bank had seen to be sinking for the last three months, and that the danger of a slip had been apprehended for some time by many of the workmen. The most that could be said in

November & December 1893

defence of those who were in charge of the work was that it was safe enough in dry weather. In dry weather! Is not this a strong defence? They were in short depending upon the continuance of certain meteorological conditions for the safety of workmen and general public. The survivors of the Quillinan families have the strongest possible grounds for complaint against the Government and only that the loss to the bereaved is such as could barely be estimated in cash, nothing would please the public better than to see an action for damages set afoot. It is of course fashionable for persons to seize upon the slightest pretext for suing the Government, but no stronger justification could possibly exist than the present. When ordinary individuals without any special knowledge of engineering could see the danger and predict the event that has just taken place, it was surely the height of culpable foolishness to permit a continuance of the menace to public safety. This is particularly the case when the remedy was so plain and inexpensive, but even had it not been so the work ought to have been suspended rather than endanger the lives of the public. In pleasing contrast to the Government neglect stands the sympathy of the residents and the energy and generosity shown by all, in the work of recovering the bodies. It is said that there was not an able-bodied man in the neighbourhood, who had had five minutes sleep from the time of the accident till the exhumation of the last of the bodies, and large numbers also accompanied the deceased to Wanganui and attended the funeral on Wednesday. The loss to the survivors of the Quillinan families is most terrible and will throw a dark shade of sorrow over the remainder of their lives. The dead may be mourned but the living relations are the real victims.

The Makohine Calamity.

DISTRESSING SCENES.

Few who witnessed the incidents that took place at the scene of the late disaster are likely to lose the horrible impression during the remainder of their lives and in a small it was probably as heart sickening as any battle field. The distress of the bereaved as their dear ones were unearthed, the eager feverish haste of the men, and the pitiable hopes of parents and friends of the unfortunate ones combined to make it a day and a night to be remembered as long as memory holds her seat. The slip was a most extensive one covering fully five chains of the road with dirt six to eight feet deep. Huge trees that had done much towards keeping up the large embankment in the past could no longer stand the enormous weight of the loosened mass and were torn down bodily and carried by the rush of earth, many in their original upright positions; gazing upon the immense mass of inextricable confusion, one felt strangely awed. Very shortly after the occurrence willing hands came from all directions to undertake what seemed a perfectly super human task of searching for the victims under the hundreds of tons of earth and timber, but colonial manhood is stout of heart and strong of limb and there could be no keener spur to courage and endurance than now goaded the men to do their utmost. Mrs P. Quillinan was seen talking in wild and piteous tones to the overseer directing him with as much coherence as could be expected at such a time, where the bodies were likely to be found, and giving such particulars as her scattered facilities could frame. The men were speedily at work with instruments of every size and description and more hands were

November & December 1893

constantly arriving with grave determined faces willing to render all assistance that was in their power till the work was done. It was decided to work in 20 minute spells up to 5 o'clock. Mr McGonagle struck a channel right through the debris along the centre of the road as Mrs Quillinan was positive that three bodies would be found there, which proved to be correct. After about an hour's labour at the Hunterville end of the slip, a cry was raised that one of the bodies was in sight and about 15 minutes work released the corpse of Mrs Quillinan from beneath a tree that had struck the life out of her against the hard road. Those who dragged her from her place of death felt that a brave woman had never sacrificed herself in a more noble cause. The second shift went on shortly after half past twelve and worked away as though their own lives were depending on their efforts. There were now fully a hundred men on the ground and none were idle except those who could not find tools to work with, but under these disabilities many employed themselves as well as they could by handling the clods. Soon after the starting of the second shift the body of one of Mrs T Quillinan's children was unearthed and before the shift went off another was discovered. The three bodies discovered were in a state of mutilation that defies description and it might have shaken the strongest nerves to look upon them.

THE POSITION OF THE OTHER TWO BODIES

had now been considered. Mrs P. Quillinan was at first doubtful upon this point but again succeeded in guiding the men correctly. Mr McGonagle directed that an avenue should be cut along the railway side of the road towards Ohingaiti. Work was prosecuted in this direction and Mr McGonagle ordered the men to make for a point about 50 feet from the southern end of the slip. More hands kept continually coming from all directions and late in the afternoon there must have been over 200 busily at work. The labour was most distressing yet no one flinched but pushed forward with steady silent energy. Great direction and forethought was shown by Mr McGonagle in the disposal of the excavated material which was piled in a huge pyramid in the middle of the road. Towards dusk food was handed around to the men and was eaten in the idle intervals between the shifts. As night closed in the scene became almost tragic. Kerosene torch lights were procured and the work continued as well as was possible under such difficulties. The night was fortunately fine and clear and a new moon gave some assistance to the red glare of the torches, but as the night advanced the darkness increased rapidly, and at length with the last gleam of twilight the torches alone revealed the stalwart forms, eager faces, and sweaty brows of the brave workers. The management was most ably conducted by Mr McGonagle and although the work was heavy and tiring there was scarce a stroke in vain. At about 9pm when some 50 feet had been gone over and the third shift under the management of Mr McCarten had come on,

THE BODY OF JOHN QUILLINAN

came in view, and was found to be in a fearful state of mutilation – quite beyond recognition. The corpse was extricated with some trouble and laid beside its mother in the cottage of Mr T. Quillinan. Mrs Quillinan, who had guided Mr McGonagle correctly so far, was doubtful whether her own child Mary Jane was at the left or right hand side of the road at the time of the accident. The work was however carried on the right hand side, and also from the point where the fourth body was discovered. It was found more easily here, the depth of the earth being much less than on the other

November & December 1893

side of the road. There was but little hope of the child being rescued alive but the parents hoped against hope that the little one might have escaped the fate of her aunt and cousins through the protection of some friendly log or mound but those who were more calm and collected felt sure that the hope was illusive yet refrained from tearing away this last remnant of comfort. At about 1 o'clock a point was reached exactly opposite to where John Quillinan was discovered, and it was known afterwards that the cutting at this time was not a yard from the body of Mary Jane, but the search unfortunately was carried further on until the two gangs met across the road. At three o'clock Mr McGonagle who was thoroughly exhausted from the great strain of severe labour for nearly twenty hours at a stretch was forced to retire, having placed the management in the hands of Mr Somers (Road Inspector) and Mr Bathelson, who proved able substitutes. The men were now thoroughly weary but there was yet but little abatement in their energies. Returning on their course they came upon the last body a few feet from the road and it was found that the first cutting had passed within a few feet of it. A relaxation was now indulged in and probably rest was never better earned. Gazing at the immense pile of earth that had been removed one is perfectly astonished that it could all be handled in a day by any gang of men that could conveniently get at it. There was a total absence of the usual jocularly which characterises the New Zealand labourer; every face was solemn and eager and every man irrespective of his capability did his utmost, showing that a kind heart beats beneath the rough coat of the New Zealand worker and a most sympathetic nature is hidden from the superficial observer by a covering of rough humour. Perhaps the only pleasant thought that will be carried from the scene of heart-breaking distress will be the consciousness that "each man had done his duty." A word of praise is due to Messrs Donovan, O'Keefe, and McCarten, who had charge of the three gangs, for their discretion and skill, also to Mr McGonagle (Inspector) for his able management of the operations and great discretion. It is impossible to mention everyone who rendered most valuable assistance. The hotelkeepers, the storekeepers (among the latter Mr J.P. Aldridge in particular), timber merchants, and businessmen generally were most generous in their aid, but we cannot pass over Mr Ovington in this manner. He is connected with the Salvation Army, and it being against his principles to distribute intoxicants as the hotels were doing he, with the ingenuity of true generosity, discovered a way out of the difficulty. He distributed 15 gallons of hop beer among the men.

SCENE AT THE HOUSE

Mrs Wheeler took the whole responsibility of washing and dressing the bodies, and for this onerous and unpleasant duty much gratitude is due to her. The corpses were laid out in Mr T. Quillinan's cottage. The deceased mother was placed on the right hand side of the entrance, with her three children at her side, and the body of Mary Jane Quillinan at the foot. Many persons visited this house of sorrow from motives that were anything but those of idle curiosity and few left with dry eyes. The calamity can never be forgotten by any of the present generation, who were even remotely affected by it, and the loss to the Quillinan brothers and the surviving wife, is such as will throw a heavy gloom over their lives for many a year.

November & December 1893

THE INQUEST

An inquest was held on the bodies of the victims of the Makohine catastrophe at Allcock's Royal Hotel, Ohingaiti, on Tuesday afternoon, before Mr Gardner, J.P. (acting coroner), and a jury of six. The scene of the accident and the bodies of the victims had previously been inspected.

The first witness called was Mrs Patrick Quillinan. She deposed:

I saw the deceased, Mrs T. Quillinan, at about 8 o'clock on the morning of the accident; saw a swing fixed up about one yard from the road. My own daughter Mary Jane was in company with the other children. I was standing at the door of my house at the time of the accident. It was a large tree that struck them first. Mrs T. Quillinan was in the centre of the road. It did not take half a minute from the beginning to the end. Tommy Quillinan was some distance back in the bush. My little girl was nearly at home. Mrs T. Quillinan was sitting sewing in her house just before the slip occurred, and hearing the cracking sound rushed out and endeavoured to save her children. My daughter Popsey was home at the time, had never thought that there was any danger to be feared.

Several other witnesses gave evidence, but nothing of an interesting nature was brought to light, except that the bank had been observed to be gradually sinking for the past three months, but generally it had not been thought there was any danger.

The jury, after a brief consultation, decided to reserve their decision until Wednesday.

LATER.

We have not as yet received any definite information with respect to the verdict on Wednesday, but from hearsay we gather that it went to affirm (1) That the deceased met their deaths by accident, in consequence of a slip of the spoil bank at the Makohine cutting. (2) That much blame is attached to the engineers for permitting houses to be built below the embankment; more especially as the danger appears to have been apprehended for some time by the authorities and others. (3) That the road should have been deviated for the general safety of the public.

THE FUNERAL

We cull the following details from the Chronicle. --- By the 11.15 train on Wednesday morning the bodies of the victims of the late fatality at Makohine were brought into town. A large number of sympathetic friends gathered at the station, while many came in by train to pay their last respects to the dead. The five coffins – containing the bodies of the late Mrs Quillinan, her two sons, Thomas and John, her daughter Hannah, and her niece Popsey --- were placed in two hearses and conveyed by way of the Avenue, to the cemetery. A most touching scene took place at the grave, and more than one strong man among the followers gave vent to his feelings in tears. The greatest sympathy is felt for the sorrowing husband and father, who has so suddenly been bereaved of all his

November & December 1893

loved ones. The duties of undertaker were creditably and expeditiously carried out by Messrs. Stokes Bros. of Ohingaiti.

Extracts from the Paraekaretu Express published by Joseph Ivess.

Hunterville. Tuesday, November 21st, 1893.

THE MAKOHINE DISASTER

The verdict of the jury, which sat at Ohingaiti on the death of Mrs Quillinan and children was that, "it was caused by a quantity of earth falling from the railway works on the public road, and the jury wish to add the following rider, that in their opinion the Public Works Department is deserving of great censure for allowing such an enormous quantity of earth to be tipped over the hillside, when the public road was immediately below, to the danger of the general public."

The Late Makohine Calamity.

-----:O:-----

EXPRESSIONS OF CONDOLENCE

On Sunday afternoon last, a public meeting was convened at Meehan's Hall, Ohingaiti, of sympathisers with the Quillinan family, to consider the best steps to be taken to secure relief for the terrible calamity which has recently befallen them. Just as the meeting was about to open, the community received the sudden shock of a report which spread through the town like wildfire, that two men had been drowned in the Rangitikei at the Tuha ford immediately opposite the township. This sad intelligence had the effect of causing a stampede in the direction of the scene of this melancholy occurrence. When the proceedings opened, there could not have been more than 50 persons present. On the motion of Mr Gardiner Mr Ivess was voted to the chair.

The Chairman said he deeply sympathised with the Quillinan family in their bereavement, occasioned through such sad circumstances. He felt sure that the entire community shared with him in that sympathy. It was only that day week Mrs Thomas Quillinan assisted him to catch his horse which had strayed away, and when he learnt the next morning that the poor woman, with her three little children, had met with such a terrible death, he received a great shock. It was now a question how they could assist to alleviate the sorrow of the bereaved husband and fathers of those who has perished. He had no hesitation in saying that the Public Works Department was directly responsible for the disaster that deprived the father of his cherished wife and children. It would be for the meeting to determine whether it would be wise to approach the Minister for Public Works in an amicable manner for a compassionate allowance in favour of the bereaved, or place the matter in

November & December 1893

the hands of a solicitor to seek legal redress. He, however, was of opinion that it would be well for the meeting to appoint a deputation to proceed to Wellington to interview the head of the Government shortly after the elections were concluded. A legal opinion on the subject was passed up to him, which he read for their information. The following is a copy of the same:

Hunterville, November 18th, 1893.

To Mr Thomas Quillinan, Makohine.

Dear Sir,

Upon the question submitted to me with reference to your claim for compensation from the Crown for the recent deaths of your wife and children at Makohine, I am of opinion: - 1. That the deaths were caused by the negligence of the servants of the Crown, in tipping over the hillside immediately about the place where the accident occurred, enormous quantities of earth. 2. That the Crown, therefore, is liable to you for damages for the deaths that occurred. 3. That the amount of compensation you consider yourself entitled to should be assessed and steps immediately taken to bring the claim before the proper authorities.

I am, yours truly,

W. Meldrum.

Extracts from the Paraekaretu Express published by Joseph Ivess.

Hunterville. Tuesday, December 5th, 1893.

OUR OPEN COLUMN.

THE LATE MAKOHINE DISASTER.

TO THE EDITOR.

Sir, -- At a public meeting at Ohingaiti on the sad disaster, at the Makohine Gorge, you expressed an opinion that the Government were, in a measure, responsible for the accident, and that a request should be made to them, to make what poor compensation they could in the way of some money payment, and provision for the sufferers. I write to ask if such a request has been made to the Government, and if so, if an answer has been received, and what is the nature of that answer?

Yours, etc.,

ARTHUR TOWGOOD.

November & December 1893

(A deputation, consisting of Messrs John Stevens, M.H.R., John Gardiner, Dean and Ivess, were appointed to wait on the Minister for Public Works, to ask for a compensation allowance. The deputation was to have left yesterday, but in consequence of an alteration in the time-table, they were unable to leave for Wellington before today. Ed. P.E.)

Extract from the Paraekaretu Express published by Joseph Ivess.

Hunterville. Friday, December 8th, 1893.

The Makohine Disaster

COMPASSIONATE ALLOWANCE GRANTED

On Wednesday last Messrs John Stevens, M.H.R., John Gardiner, and J. Ivess waited upon the Premier at Wellington, to urge to granting of compassionate allowances in favour of the Quillinans.

Mr Stevens, in introducing the deputation, said that the recent disaster at Makohine, caused by a slip from the spoil bank, was the means of killing Mrs Thomas Quillinan and her three children, and also a child belonging to Mr Patrick Quillinan. Widespread sympathy was expressed for the bereaved parents, and the public were of opinion that the disaster was caused through the negligence of the Government engineers permitting the soil to be thrown out so near to the public road. It was believed that the fathers of those who had perished had a legal claim upon the Government for compensation.

Mr Ivess said that a public meeting was held at Ohingaiti about a fortnight ago at which the deputation present was appointed. A legal opinion was read, which held that the Government was liable for the accident caused by the negligence of its officers. The sympathisers with the Quillinan families wished to approach the Government in a friendly spirit, believing that they would recognise the fairness of making a compassionate allowance to the fathers. All the children belonging to Thomas Quillinan had perished, with the exception of one little girl, who, he believed, was about 8 years of age. This child, who was now deprived of her mother's care, was clearly entitled to a provision being made for her education and clothing until such time as she was capable of doing for herself. Thomas incurred heavy funeral expenses, and had suffered much in mind. He thought that Patrick Quillinan, who had lost one child, was also entitled to the consideration of the Government. Although the deputation felt sure that the Government was legally responsible, it preferred to ask the Government to deal with the case from an amicable and sympathetic standpoint.

November & December 1893

Mr Gardiner said that he was coroner of the jury before whom the inquest was held, and the jury were unanimously of opinion that the engineers had been guilty of negligence for permitting spoil material to be thrown out over a public road. He had assisted to extricate the bodies from the debris, and he could assure the Premier that the bodies of all the deceased were found lying upon the metal of the high road. Although Thomas Quillinan was quite a young man, his hair since the accident, was beginning to turn grey. The two fathers had been put to heavy expenses in the matter of the burial of their children, as they had engaged a special train to convey the bodies of Mrs Thomas Quillinan and the four children to Wanganui. The public of Ohingaiti had subscribed liberally towards a fund for the purpose of prosecuting an action against the Government, which he hoped the Premier would render unnecessary.

The Hon. Mr Seddon said that he had carefully gone into the matter, and taken the opinion of the law officers on the subject, which showed that the Crown could in no way be held liable at law for damages. The rider of the jury was clearly a reflection on the Public Works Department and he intended to appoint an independent engineer outside the Government to report on the matter. He deeply sympathised with the families who had sustained such a terrible loss by the disaster, and perhaps the best course for them to adopt would be to petition Parliament for a compassionate allowance. The petition committee, however, might think that the case was one of an unjust character, which the Government could have fairly dealt with. He was prepared to accept the responsibility, and would recommend to the Cabinet the granting of £50 per annum in favour of the child of Thomas Quillinan until she reached 21 years, £200 to Thomas Quillinan, and £100 to Patrick Quillinan.

The deputation expressed their approval of the recommendation, and having thanked the Premier for his courtesy, withdrew.

At a meeting of the Cabinet held in the afternoon, the Premier's recommendation was approved of, and the money is now available.

The micro-filmed files of the Paraekaretu Express (1893) were accessed for this article at the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, in March 1982.