

little ship, handy, well-designed and had exceptional sea-keeping qualities. Her trade mark was her delightful capped funnel. On the other hand, all she offered in the way of personal hygiene was a cold water washing basin in the toilet. Showers were provided on the wharf in Patea or by arrangement in the Harbour Board offices in Wanganui. This only proved a disadvantage when the ship went to other ports around the country in the off dairy season, and a distinct disadvantage for a young man intent on capturing the eye of likely young ladies. One always wondered about personal hygiene if a close embrace seemed possible with the guilty knowledge that ones last body wash had been taken in the ships toilet using a bucket of cold water! An added misery was when servicing out ports in the off-season; it was always in the depths of winter.

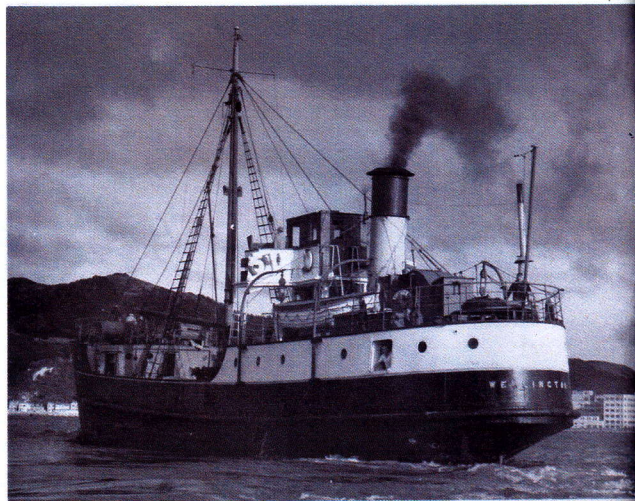
The First Sailing

The ship was up to sail for Patea an hour after I joined her, and being trained in big ships, I immediately went through the motions of testing the navigation gear, an absolute requirement in big ships. While I was testing the steering gear the old captain came up to me and asked me what I was doing. I replied I was testing the steering. "Don't bother with that," he replied, "we only came in this morning and it was all right then." This was the first intimation I had that I had entered a different world. The next was when the boatswain asked me my name and from that time I was no longer Mister but Nic. So we sailed. Although it was my watch the captain remained with me until we had passed Karori Light and then told me to alter course to NNE as soon as we cleared Cape Terawhiti. I was concerned both that we had passed closer along the south coast than I had ever been before and that, other than the compass and wheel, no chart or other navigation instrument was in evidence. Now, I was being told verbally to alter course towards Patea on my own initiative and to steer a course that may or may not take us there! Sure it was the master's instructions but an officer's duty was to check, recheck and to know what dangers lay about him and above all to be confident where his course was leading him. I already knew that this task was going to be somewhat difficult with the complete lack of any reliable means to verify this.

As the master left the bridge I asked him for a chart which I felt would at least be available. I was wrong! The captain looked at me in surprise and said, "A chart! Ah, yes. I've got one somewhere. I'll look it up." As a matter of fact it was weeks later that the captain handed me his chart saying, "You wanted to look at a chart. Well I found it in a draw under my socks." It was dated about 10 years earlier and had never been corrected so as to be currently accurate. (This may sound like a tall tale but I can only assure the reader that it actually happened.)

By this time, however, I no longer needed it and had become a competent and knowledgeable dog-bark coaster seaman. I was still a professional, however, and had surreptitiously

provided myself with my own charts as well as the required instruments, books and ports information manuals, including aerial photos of the ports we visited that I knew little about. I still retain these photos.



Inaha sailing from Wellington, 1953

Going Deep Sea?

I recall once going from Westport to Onehunga in this small ship. This course takes one well off the coast and due to heavy weather, bad visibility and the fact that the master wouldn't have the patent log streamed, ("Never trust the things, anyway, they can get you in trouble!") our DR positions were not really reliable and the Manakau Bar (Onehunga) is not a place to approach in thick weather unless you are confident where you are. The master had muttered a few doubts about this.

I had just bought a particularly accurate watch and by coincidence had set it by time signal only the day before. During my watch the sky cleared and I obtained a noon shot which confirmed my watch time and gave a rough distance made good, as we had not been able to make a good departure point. The sun finally disappeared but I knew Venus was about and was lucky enough to be able to find it in a cloud break about an hour and a half later. Running up these two position lines gave me what I felt was a pretty reasonable fix. (Memory is unreliable but please allow me this small conceit. I had always wanted to use Venus and this was the only time I ever managed it.)

The captain watched all this with complete disinterest and suggested it was really a waste of time but his attitude was sort of 'Let the young fellow have play'. Afterwards I went below and soon I knew by the motion of the ship that we had altered course. Sure enough when I came back on watch we were steering the course I had calculated. The captain explained this by remarking that as the visibility had improved he was bringing her closer in. We picked up Manakau Heads Light later that night and were snug alongside Onehunga Wharf soon after breakfast. We had saved some twelve hours as we would surely have missed the morning tide had we not changed course. The old

captain was very experienced and perhaps he really did alter course out of years of sea wisdom and not because of anything I did. I've always wondered.

A Fish Story

Anyway back to my first trip in the *Inaha* which soon provided more surprises than I was prepared for and exposed me in quick time to the unique climate in which the cheese boats operated. We arrived off Patea a few hours before the tide and I was called on deck. I knew the engines had stopped a couple of hours earlier and imagined we were simply drifting awaiting the tidal signal before crossing the bar. Again, imagine my surprise to find we were still some miles from Patea and the whole 11 crew members were lining the port rail fishing. The fishing positions on the ship I learned later were strictly apportioned according to seniority, the captain right aft, which was supposedly the best place and descending in rank forward to where the deck boy stood by the break of the fore-castle-head. The deck was already covered in high quality groper, blue cod and schnapper.

Seeing me the captain hauled up his line unhooked his fish and said nonchalantly, 'You'll have to get your own line next time we're in Wellington but the cook's just going to get breakfast so you can use his for the moment.' By this time I was past surprise and dumbly baited the line and threw it over next to the captain and again to my surprise brought up a fine schnapper and a fat blue cod within a minute or two.

Soon, however, the engines were started and we headed off towards Patea which was still about an hour's steaming away. I went down to breakfast and in the galley the cook had selected a beautiful baby groper almost still kicking which he began slicing into succulent steaks. The galley had a coal fired stove the top of which was glowing a cherry red. He tossed a steak onto the stove flipped it after half a minute and served it up with eggs and bacon. I had never tasted anything so delicious and this was a regular and frequent addition to the menu all the time I was in the Patea boats. Since then I have become only an occasional fish eater because, I think, I am now aware how fresh fish should really taste and bought fish never does.

The Local Fish Market

There was a social side to this fish story, however. Patea River bar is very dangerous and every fishing boat that had tried to work it regularly had been wrecked, often with loss of life. This had become so frequent that the Ministry of Marine (as it was then) refused to give license to any fishing boat that wanted to work out of Patea. This had left the town without a local fish industry so the cheese boats began to fill the need. With the three ships arriving up to ten times a week and usually managing to do a bit of fishing on the way this worked well. As we sold our fish the town had backed up an application from the ships and each had a commercial fishing license! This side-line was so successful that my earnings from fishing meant that I never had to touch my wages during the

season. The wharf would be as crowded with locals on arrival in Patea as the ship's decks would be covered in fish and ship's business took second place to selling our fish, but it was generally all sold within a few minutes. There were standard prices 2/6 (25c) for a groper, 1/- (10c) for a schnapper and from 1/- to 6d (25c to 5c) for blue cod, depending on size. On two occasions the fishing bounty was so large that we would get an empty railway insulated wagon from the cheese grader, load it with our excess fish then consign it by rail to the market in New Plymouth. We had some big cheques.

We usually fished in particular spots over the Whenuakura Spur or off the Longbush but don't expect such fishing beneficence these days, the big trawlers have all but fished out the area. It's hard to believe that we always baited several hooks on our lines and it was common to pull up, not only more than one fish on a line, but that the fish were hooked almost immediately the line was dropped.



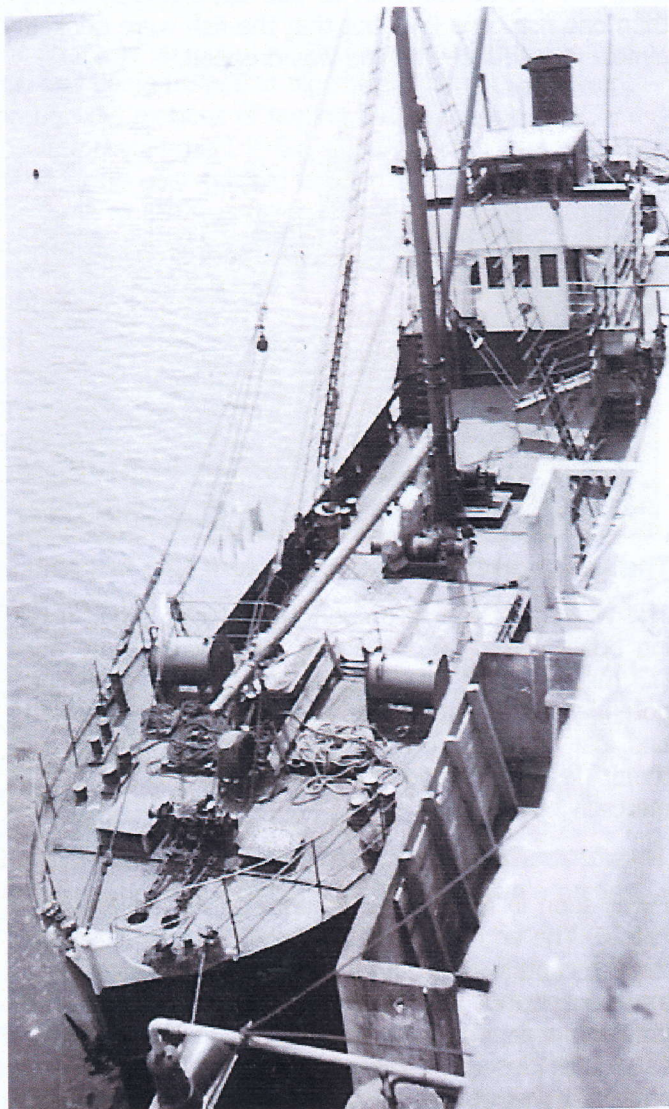
The Inaha on the Evans Bay Patent Slip in 1953

The wisdom of the restriction on licencing small fishing boats was proved again in 1965 when a 42 foot (13 metres) boat was engaged to survey the fishing potential out of Patea. She was very soon overturned and lost on the bar with loss of life. No further attempt has been made to my knowledge to fish commercially out of Patea.

The Patea River

I was soon in for another surprise as we approached Patea. The entrance isn't very obvious from seaward but the captain pointed out the harbour light and told me the entrance was adjacent to it. I could see seas breaking over something and decided to wait and see. As we got closer and the training walls became more obvious I was aghast at how narrow and intimidating the entrance was. I looked at the captain and asked, 'Surely that's not the entrance it looks far too narrow?' He replied that not only was it the entrance but that part of it was shoaled up and we could only use half the width. I was starting to wonder if I was in a ship full of mad men. Soon we saw the signal for 'Stand on take the bar' (four horizontal black ball shapes on the cross spar ●●●●) and headed in on the leads. The boatswain arrived on the bridge and went to the starboard side of the hand-gear wheel. I was told to

take the port side and help him. So we made for the bar. The ship scended, rolled and surfed on the incoming waves while the captain worked frantically with us on the wheel and ran back and forwards to the engine telegraphs to lower or increase power on different engines if the ship took a bad sheer (and she did often!) but mainly we ran in under full power and there wasn't much of that either. To me it was simply bedlam but somehow we got inside and everything suddenly became calm as we began our tranquil approach to the wharf about a mile up the river. Yes, I did become used to the Patea bar and worked it many times, but it needed great caution and good knowledge. As a matter of fact, I have over the years crossed most of the bars in this country as well as many overseas but it remains my opinion that until you have worked the Patea bar you've never seen a real bar!



Inaha lying at the Patea Cheese Grader Wharf.

Dog-Bark Navigation

Dog-bark (local knowledge) navigation, although good enough in reasonable conditions, could have its down side for the inexperienced. On one occasion in rain and poor visibility, while making a northerly course through Cook Strait from Cape Campbell, past the Brothers and round towards Cape Koamaru, I had

allowed leeway for the expected tidal flow through the Straits that should push us to the east. One must treat Cook Strait tidal flows with caution and this time the tide did not turn and remained running to the north. This can happen sometimes in the Straits however, and while running in bad visibility (before the advent of radar) there was no satisfactory way of checking this. I was standing on the bridge as the murk began to clear and suddenly I saw what I took to be Cape Koamaru ahead, fine on the port bow approximately where I had expected it to be. I began to relax when the man at the wheel drew my attention to a high land mass that was appearing through the mist and towering over the ship close in to port. We were close inshore and within a short time would have been ashore on the rocks below Wellington Head. (This headland on the north side of Tory Channel has now been renamed Perano Head to save confusion.) The pinnacle rocks off the headland had almost the same shape as Cape Koamaru and in the mist had given the impression that I was viewing the Cape from a distance rather than rocks close to. Of course, I should have known better, but the rocks had appeared exactly where I had expected the Cape to be and I unwisely accepted this. The lesson, as always, was never to take anything for granted. The tide and weather had combined to dramatically alter our track made good.

Acceptance

Eventually the standard run between Patea or Wanganui and Wellington, that lasted most of the year, became second nature and I seldom had recourse to any great navigation skills. Being a West Coast run bad weather was frequent and one learned many things about ship handling that were not to found in any books. Southerlies were always a hazard, especially when visibility became heavily restricted in continuing rain and, if approaching the Straits at night, one stood for ages looking ahead into driving rain and spray trying to make out Ohau Point or some point of reference to enable you to round Cape Terawhiti. There was a light beacon on Ohau Point, but it had been placed on top of the hill and the beam oriented 30 degrees upward to double as an aircraft beacon consequently, it was often shrouded in hill-top mist and because its main beam was aimed skywards it was without the luminosity to shine through any cloud to seaward. Even after managing to overcome this, one had to fight through the Straits and pass through the rips and roughs off the south coast because our steaming time from high water at Patea and Wanganui would usually coincide with a head tide in the Straits and we lacked the power to make a good off shore course. There were also the days spent tossing off the bars during heavy seas with an empty ship at Patea or Wanganui waiting for the bars to become workable. Shelter was not always an option.

Foreign Going?

The Patea ships were busy and hard working and often were able to load at Patea and sail on the same tide which was good for profit but very tiring for the

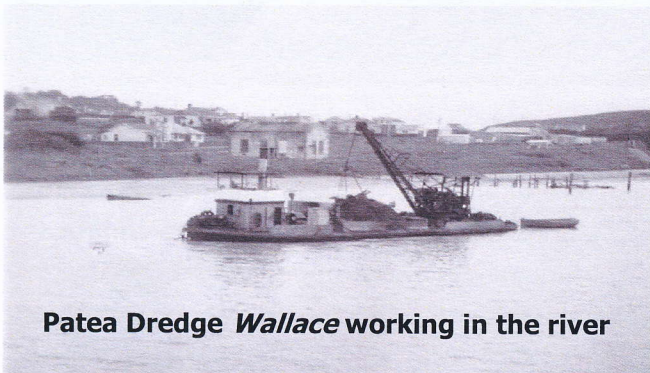
crews. Even in the winter off season they had little rest other than a week's survey in Wellington or Nelson. At this time they worked the apple run from Nelson, Mapua, and Motueka, and once I even called at Collingwood. They ranged through the Marlborough Sounds picking up wool from the isolated stations and carried cargoes to ports as far south as Timaru and as far north as Onehunga. The West Coast of the South Island was sometimes serviced too if cargo was offering, and I once went as far south as Jackson Bay, although Westport or Greymouth were more usual.



Loading cheese into No2 hold of the *Inaha* in Patea, five crates to the sling; two cheese rounds to the crate.

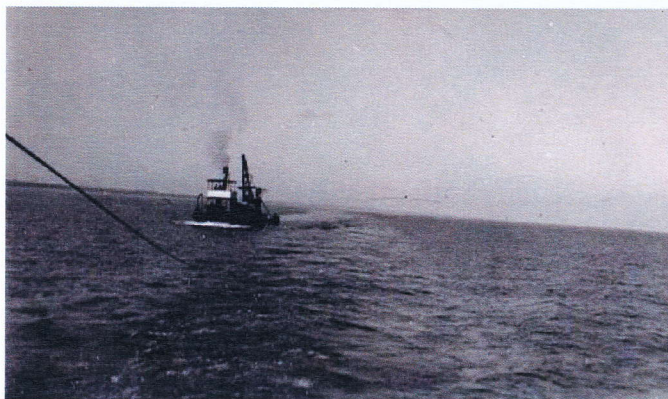
The Finale

The West Coast Refrigerating Company (the Grader) merged with The Taranaki Producers Freezing Works Company in 1954 and gradually this new company began to ship cheese through New Plymouth and finally concentrated all dairy products at New Plymouth. The South Taranaki Shipping Company then decided to cease operations and the *Inaha* made



Patea Dredge *Wallace* working in the river

the last trip from Patea in August 1959 ending a service from the port that had survived for a century. The Patea dredge *Wallace* was sold and converted to a sand barge in Wanganui in 1960. The Patea Harbour Board was taken over by the Taranaki Harbours Board in 1964.

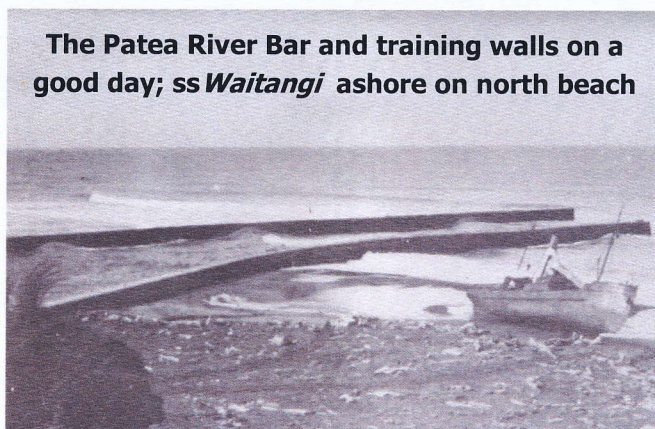


***Wallace* off Waitotara, under tow for the 30 nautical mile return to Patea after survey and slipping in Wanganui.**

The *Wallace* was the second dredge to work at Patea and had an interesting history. She had started life as a gold dredge on the Waikaia River, Southland (ca. 1882), then, after being rebuilt as a steam-worked grab dredge, she worked for the Riverton Harbour Board before being purchased by the Patea Harbour Board. Her surveys and slippings were always undertaken in Wanganui to where she would be towed, both ways, by the *Inaha*. She was sold and finished her life as a sand barge on the Wanganui River in 1962. Her triple expansion propulsion engine can be seen preserved in the Tokomaru Steam Museum, near Shannon in the Horowhenua District.

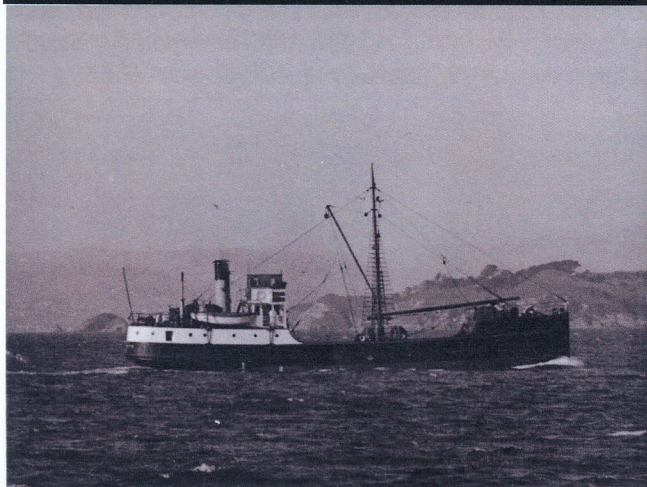
THE PATEA BAR

The photo below shows the Patea River bar on a calm day but still with a typically heavy surge running in between the training walls. The narrow entrance can be seen that gave little margin for error, and was partly shoaled on the south side. Although many ships were stranded and damaged on the Patea Bar the short fetch between the bar and the beach enabled most to be salvaged, but many of those salvaged proved to be constructive total losses anyway and were broken up. Some of these constructive total losses are not recorded as losses against the port. Sixteen others, like the *Waitangi* shown here on the west beach, left their bones around the river mouth forever.



The Patea River Bar and training walls on a good day; ss *Waitangi* ashore on north beach

THE LAST THREE PATEA SHIPS



1. t.s.m.v. *Inaha* outward bound from Wellington, passing Point Jerningham.

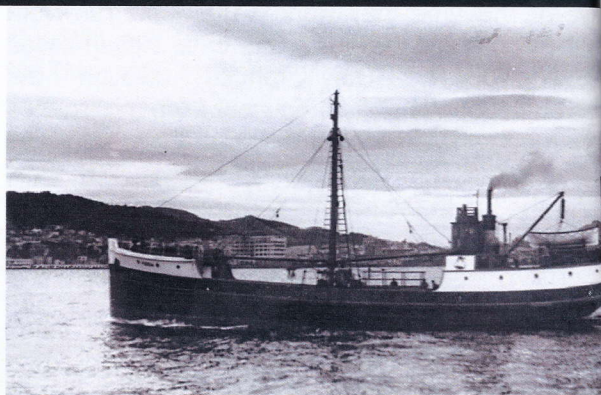
Built Montrose, Scotland in 1923. ON: 121396 115.5 tons net register. 108.2 feet x 23.15 x 9. Speed about 9 knots. Built new for the South Taranaki Shipping Co. First diesel ship to work in NZ and the first coaster with electric winches. Steel vessel built with twin Plenty hot bulb diesels but later re-engined with twin Polar Atlas diesels. An exceptionally good sea-kindly vessel. Speed 8.5 knots. Hold capacity was about 3,000 crates of cheese but draught restrictions at Patea restricted this to around 2,400 crates, loaded well forward to adjust her draught for the Patea Bar. Foundered off Cape Lambert, New Britain in 1963 after throwing a screw.



2. m.v. *Foxton*

She is shown here alongside King's Wharf One, Wellington. The brick building was the Harbour Board Cheese Transhipping cool store

Built in Auckland in 1929. ON:153982 99.75 tons net register. 101.66 feet x 27.91 x 7.66. Speed about 8 knots. Owned by South Taranaki Co. from 1939 to 1959. Wooden twin screw vessel. Generally a good seaworthy vessel. Twin GM diesels. Cargo capacity not known but would have been around 2000 crates of cheese. Last known location Papeete, Tahiti where she was named *Namoiata*.



3. m.v. *Tiroa*

Built in Auckland in 1916. ON:1136868 99.65 tons net register. 112.8 feet x 22.6 x 7.8. Speed about 8 knots. Owned by South Taranaki Co. 1942 to 1957. Wooden single screw vessel. Nice vessel but difficult in a heavy sea, could not be pushed as she was inclined to open up and let in water. Single Fairbanks Morse wide diesel. Speed about 7.5 knots. Cargo capacity probably about 1800 crates of cheese. Dismantled in 1963 and hull towed to Wakatahuri, Pelorus Sound.

THE MARCH OF TIME

1954



The Patea wharves in 1954. The dredge *Wallace* and the pilot launch are lying at the General Cargo Wharf. The Railway Wharf is empty while the *Foxton* and *Inaha* are at the Cheese Grader Wharf. The Cattle Wharf is across the river.

1970



The Cheese Grader and Cool Store buildings in 1970 remain in good condition and are still in occasional use for rail traffic. All the wharves and harbour sheds appear to be still in reasonable condition as well, although marine traffic is non-existent.