

## **BOWEN: WALTER GODFREY**

**Known as Godfrey**

**Born: 13 February 1922, Hastings, New Zealand**

**Married: 14 May 1946, Palmerston Nth, New Zealand**

**To: Mavis Edna Telford (1922 – 2019)**

**Resided in Levin: from 1953 - 1980**

**Died: 2 January 1994, Rotorua, New Zealand**

**Buried: Kauae cemetery, Ngongotaha, Rotorua, New Zealand**

### **Honours**

**Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) 1960**

**The two top Soviet honours, Hero of Labour and the Star of Lenin,  
awarded by Premier Nikita Khrushchev for his work with shearers  
in the Soviet Union, 1963**

**NZ Newman award for Individual Tourism Promotion, 1970**

**Elected to NZ Sports Hall of Fame 1990**

### ***Godfrey's parents were:***

Walter Eugene (1883 – 1956) and Catherine Rudman Wall (1889 – 1956).

His siblings were:

James Eugene (1913 – 1913)

Eion Jeffrey (1915 – 1983)

Ivan Verdun (1916 – 2007)

Kenneth Maurice (1917 – 1998)

Colin James (1925 – 1940)

### ***Godfrey and Mavis had four children:***

Paul

Keith

Alice

Delwynne

Godfrey's father had been a station manager in Hawkes Bay before moving to Hastings to become a builder. The family later owned a farm-let at Havelock North where they milked cows and delivered milk around the district.

They then moved to Te Puke, where his father established a sawmill.

Godfrey attended Havelock North Primary school and then Te Puke Primary school. He had no secondary education due to the Depression and had to milk cows for the family. However, he later studied accountancy from 1945-1950.

Brothers Eion and Ivan formed a partnership as shearing contractors and Godfrey joined them at age 16, shortly before World War II. During the war he and Ivan were exempted from military service to continue the essential work of shearing.

They shored for 7 days a week, until they saw stars and literally until they bled from the nose.

After the war Ivan concentrated more on the family sawmilling business, while Godfrey carried on with the shearing. Being a thickset man of medium height would undoubtedly serve him well.

The Bowen brothers developed a shearing style that became known as the 'Bowen Technique'. It involved using the spare hand to stretch the sheep's skin, thereby improving the quality of the shorn fleece. In addition, the brothers introduced the practice of shearing sheep twice a year, now commonplace across New Zealand

In 1953, the year he brought his family to live in Levin, Godfrey set a world record by shearing 456 ewes in 9 hours, at the Akers station at Opiki. He was soon in demand at A and P shows around the North Island.

At one of these, a New Zealand Wool Board member saw Godfrey in action and realised the potential of such an outstanding shearer for the wool industry. Later that year he was hired as chief instructor of the Wool Board's new shearing section, and demonstrated his technique at shows and shearing sheds around the country.

He trained a team of 32 instructors and began senior instruction courses at Massey and Lincoln Agricultural Colleges.

His appointment as Field Director of the Wool Board was what prompted his move to Levin. In 1953 this was a growing town well suited to young families, and ideally located midway between Massey University in Palmerston North and the Head Office of the Wool Board in Wellington. Godfrey, Mavis and the four children lived in a spacious house on the corner of Queen Street and Parker Avenue (originally 570 Queen St, now 92 Parker Ave).

Godfrey's flair for showmanship and public speaking made his shearing demonstrations entertaining as well as instructional. He wrote a book "Wool Away" published in 1955 that outlined his technique. This became one of many instruction books, pamphlets and leaflets.

He helped organise, and competed in, the 1<sup>st</sup> Golden Shears national shearing tournament in Masterton in 1961, finishing 2<sup>nd</sup> behind brother Ivan.

Beyond these shores there were demonstration tours of Australia, Britain, France, the USA, South America and the Soviet Union.

He was also a shearing consultant in several countries, including South Africa, where he was responsible for a national survey of the sheep and wool industry.

In 1970 Godfrey produced and directed New Zealand's main outdoor display at Expo 70 in Japan. He continued demonstrating shearing in New Zealand and overseas throughout the decade.

In 1977, at age 55, he shored for the NZ team at the World Championships in England, finishing 4<sup>th</sup> and shearing 15 sheep in 17 minutes.

Godfrey's shearing techniques had a lasting impact on the industry in New Zealand. However, his entrepreneurial skills also endured, particularly through the Agrodome tourist venture in Rotorua, which he devised and set up. Agrodome is a world-renowned farm theme park covering 350 acres. Within it are a farmyard nursery, a woollen mill, a shearing museum with shearing demonstrations, and animals to mingle amongst.

Beyond work during his years in Levin, Godfrey had become an active member of Rotary and, as a committed Christian, an Open Brethren, he was an elder of the Queen Street Gospel Chapel. He worked with another Brethren businessman, timber merchant Bill Crighton, to establish the Forest Lakes Christian camp north of Otaki and the similar El Rancho camp in Waikanae.

Waikanae would become his next home in 1980, and then finally Rotorua in 1983.

It was in Rotorua that his action-packed life came to an end early in 1994. He suffered a heart attack, a month short of his 72<sup>nd</sup> birthday. His grave lies not far from the Agrodome in Kauae cemetery, Ngongotaha.

Godfrey's successor as Director of the Wool Board's shearing section described him as "an extraordinary shearer and a great sportsman who loved anything that was competitive".

He was a devoted family man, a gifted public speaker and motivator, a successful businessman and above all, an exceptionally hard worker.

Other highlights:

1953: Shearing demonstration before the Queen and Duke of Edinburgh.

1960: World record shearing 559 Welsh mountain sheep in 9 hours.

1961: Shore 463 full-wool Perendale sheep in 9 hours at Puketiriri, Hawkes Bay – another world record.

1971: A documentary film “A Day in the life of Godfrey Bowen” was made and shown.