

road. The dining room was an elegant room with starched white tablecloths and serviettes, fine china and cutlery. The Bishop of New Zealand once stayed at Tuakau Hotel and in 1934, the town was honoured by the visit of Air Commodore Sir Charles Kingsford Smith. The menu for this grand occasion was opulent, starting with Crème of Toheroa Soup, followed by a wide choice of poultry, fish and meat and vegetables and finished with no less than five desserts. The hotel kitchen staff must have pulled out all stops to cater for the acclaimed aviator and the many distinguished guests.

Tui Mills (76) is one who worked as a cook in the Tuakau Hotel kitchens, while her husband Grahme worked part-time in the bar for many years, eventually becoming bar manager. Grahme was a driver for Tuakau Transport, but drivers' wages were low and he and Tui had to work hard to support their growing family.

"I met Grahme at the hotel," recalls Tui. "It was a hot day and we had the doors open for cool air. Some of the truck drivers came in the back to get into the workman's bar. I was wearing a pretty black sundress with green stripes over the bust and a little jacket. Grahme said "Whose funeral are you going to?" I replied "yours if you don't shut up!" He was a cheeky devil."

As well as cooking, Tui did the cleaning and lived in the staff quarters at the back. "Bill and Stella Saunderson, who arrived in 1937, were the proprietors of the Tuakau hotel at the time, with his mother-in-law Mrs Jacobson, who was known as 'Old Jake.' They were lovely people, very hard working. No women or Maoris were allowed into the bars in those days, then they opened a ladies lounge – it was only big enough to fit about eight people, with a little slot in the wall to order. There was a huge Aga stove and a coal range in the kitchen. The menu was prepared for us and the produce brought in – we just had to cook. The dining room was lovely – it was done properly. At one stage the garden lounge was wrecked by patrons, but in later years when Tom Linson was there, it was beautifully kept."

Tui's career in hospitality started at the age of 14, when she had worked as a waitress at the Kentish in Waiuku. "The schools were shut down because of the polio epidemic and my elder sister and myself worked for £2-5s a week – most of it went to help mummy with the family. I then worked on a farm as cook and housekeeper, but was also expected to bring the cattle in and pack hay into the shed – I worked from daylight to dark, then they cut my wages. I was very happy to go to work at the Tuakau Hotel!"

After three happy years at the hotel, Tui left to take up a position in the dietary department at Auckland Hospital, but Grahme continued to work behind the bar for many years.

"A lot of characters came to the hotel – some of the stories they told us and the things they used to do! The farmers came in for Friday night's

drinking – that's when we got the stories. Claude Cartier was a real character – he made us all laugh. Another was Jack Bouskill – he seemed surly, but he had a heart of gold. Grahme knew everyone in the district from his years at Tuakau Transport." Today the grand old building is undergoing an extensive upgrade that will preserve the original exterior while transforming the interior. The upstairs accommodation will be restored and motels built at the back, the kitchen newly equipped, the wholesale department renovated and a palmed courtyard created for al fresco dining. The work involves up to 20 stages, spread over two years and the tavern will stay open to patrons and diners throughout. Tuakau Hotel/Tavern - here's to a thriving third century!

Thanks to Tuakau Museum for photos and documents – open every Sunday at 10 Liverpool St, Tuakau. Contact: 09 2368403 ■

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