



Tawa Historical Project: How I remember Tawa now

This record is a contribution to a THS project for gathering recollections from Tawa people.

Ross Armstrong, a longtime community activist and resident in Tawa since 1955.

Written by Ross Armstrong and Steve Avery, 2513 words, 12 4 26.

Ross Francis Armstrong was born on 18 December 1948. His parents, Nola and Eldon, had first met each other at the tennis club in Hataitai. Tennis was then much more popular than in the 2020s and had a significant social venue. Nola and Eldon were married in Hataitai 30 January 1940. Nola, born 18 October 1916, was the eldest of four children. The family lived in the house attached to the family Four Square grocer's shop in Waipapa Road, Hataitai. Eldon, born 23 August 1911, also lived in Waipapa Road and worked in the Prime Minister's Office during the war years. After marrying they lived in Waipapa Road with Eldon's parents, Francis John and Lillian.

Nola and Eldon had four children: Julie Ann (1941 - 2023), Robert Antony (1944), Sheryl Mary (1947 - 2016), and Ross Francis (1948). Around 1947 the family moved to Miramar to a house that Eldon built in Ashleigh Crescent.

Ross's wife Anne was born in October 1949 in Paekākāriki and then they moved to their new house in Ranui Heights, Porirua. Anne went to Queen Margaret College and then trained as a journalist and worked for the Evening Post.

Nola and Eldon were great role models and generous to a fault. Nola, through the Catholic Woman's League, was involved in helping local families. The parents of the Tawa Mason quads, quads were even more rare in the 1960s, built their house with help from the family timber company. Eldon ran the family timber business. It also had an engineering plant. Some may recall the large advertising sign on the west

side of Tawa Station which had outdoor furniture etc on display. Nola ran the family; her housekeeping was always spick and span.

During Labour Weekend 1955 Nola and Eldon moved from their Ashleigh Crescent house in Miramar to a house in Cecil Road, Tawa. The house had been built by Eldon's brother Vaughn. Eldon was a very practical person, good with his hands. He had built the family house in Miramar and did all the concreting at the Cecil Road house with help from friends in the area.

Eldon was a keen bowler, both indoor and outdoor bowling. Nola enjoyed playing indoor bowling. Ross recalls many "outings" to cold smoky halls on weekends to watch bowling matches. Eldon started the Tawa Bowling Club, and the Tawa Rotary Club. We joked that his motto was "let's start a club and I will be President". Eldon was also a good cricketer in his younger days and played golf for many years.

There was nothing distinctive about the housing in Tawa in the mid-1950s areas of varying wealth developed within Tawa once the state housing started in parts of Tawa. Ross recalls a little old rather rundown house on the Main Road where Zip Plumbing is now. There was a horse in the paddock out front. The people were poor and Nola used to help them out.

Social life growing up was mainly spending time with neighbourhood friends. The picture theatres were in Tawa and then the old hall in Porirua. Growing up in Tawa from the age of six playing was anywhere, everywhere. Ross and his friends climbed hills to the east over the new motorway on expeditions gathering mushrooms or tadpoles. Ross recalls riding bikes to school and even over the Paekākāriki Hill Road. Rabbits were hunted where Redwood housing is now. They caught eels in the stream and high jumped on the front lawn and played table tennis in the garage which had a cedar wood base. Climbing over Tawa College's new buildings when it was getting built provided a different skill and thrill. Bow and arrows were made from bamboo collected outside a house on Lincoln Avenue.

Ross began playing rugby for the Tawa Rugby Club, scoring his first try at Kowhai Park circa 1956. George Bodrick, a well-known local builder, with a large family, was the coach. Ross was even coached for rugby by all black Vince Bevan when St Francis was at Porirua. Bevan was the top New Zealand halfback in 1949; among the clubs he played for was Tawa. His part Māori heritage was leaked by a newspaper and like other worthy Māori players he was banned by the New Zealand Rugby Union in deference to the South African National Government policy of apartheid implemented after they won the election in 1948.

Then there was the skating rink and at primary school St Francis pupils went to Tawa school for swimming lessons as the Tawa pool then did not exist. There was a wide range of recreation such as radio, board games such as Monopoly and snakes

and ladders, card games, especially 500. Crystal set by the bed, it is a simple radio receiver, popular in the early days of radio using only the power of the received radio signal to produce sound, it is named for its key component, a crystal detector, originally made from a piece of crystalline mineral such as galena. This component is now called a diode. TV came much later, one channel and very much expensive and a novelty in the early 1960s, black and white until 1972, colour 31 October 1973 in time for Princess Anne's wedding November 14, 1973. Ross described himself as tone deaf so did not get involved in musical activities but did try a ukulele once. He helped run dances at the Catholic Church Hall in Rewa Terrace.



Ashleigh Crescent 1956 Robert, Ross, Julie, Cheryl

In Ross's early years Tawa was a small place where everyone knew each other. The local shops were great, shops were small, for instance there was a dairy at the bottom of Stevens Street, our local, long gone along with the thriving Linden book, hardware and grocer's shops.

There were lots of churches. Tawa was a dry area so selling alcohol was prohibited but clubs got around this legislation by running a ticket system. Prohibition had almost been almost carried by voters in a referendum in 1919, a result of this anti-alcohol sentiment was that there were very restrictive laws around selling alcohol. Liquor laws changed in the 1960s and 1970s when Parliament allowed restaurants to sell alcohol and bars to stay open after 6 o'clock in the evening but Tawa, excluding north of Linden Avenue, remained a non-alcohol selling area until years later because voters had the right at each parliament election to negate or allow a change.

The social and spatial geography of Tawa changed substantially over Ross's lifetime. Tawa College opened in 1961. The growth in Tawa took off following the motorway being fully opened. The smaller shops like the great little hardware shops in Tawa and Linden and drapers have gone, as have the local dairies in Stephen St and Tawa Tce, etc. Mexted Motors has grown larger. The picture theatre which was in the hall opposite Mexted's, where the Salvation Army shop was and is now part of Mexted's has long gone. Tawa had the Lamphouse which was where Tawa Books and Post is now. There were three tennis clubs but now there is just one. The only take-a-way then was Fish and Chips, now as with most suburbs in Wellington and over New Zealand. There was shopping as Friday night was late closing for retailers over the whole of New Zealand with trading prohibited at weekends until decades later. This was mainly local shops as Porirua's shopping developed much later. Robert Muldoon's National Government's Shop Trading Hours Amendment Act 1980, allowing Saturday trading saw shops able to open on Saturdays, and the nature of the weekend changed again. This resulted in Friday late-night shopping fading out, but the evening continued to socialise in town after work. Sunday trading became legal in 1999.

As the Armstrongs were Catholic, Ross went to Catholic schools. He started primary school at Holy Cross in Miramar, then when the family moved to Tawa in 1955, he went to Saint Francis, a full primary school, which was in Porirua where the Mobil Station is now. Saint Francis Xavier moved to a new school on the present site in Tawa in 1960. In 1962 he started at St Patrick's College Wellington, "The old grey mother", on the old site at the south end of Cambridge Terrace. Post school his learning was mainly on the job with specialist skills courses. He had tried university but couldn't hack it. Like many of his generation and all generations before him, going to university was not common and was not a gauge of how versatile and intelligent you were. Ross enjoyed school, especially the wood working classes at primary school and School Cadets at St Pats, I became the RSM (Regimental Sergeant Major). His first teacher at St Francis was Sister John Marie of the Bridgettine order. Ross never excelled at school; Ross thinks undiagnosed dyslexia most likely the cause. There were some very good teachers at St Pats an example being Father PJ O'Neil an amazing maths teacher. Ross still meets up with my class mates every month some 60 years later.



The four Armstrong children 1962/1963 Robert, Julie, Cheryl, Ross.

If Ross were to explain to a youth about the main differences between his teenage years and Tawa teenagers today, he would say he and his mates made their own fun. In his youth they made toy guns and bow and arrows and rode our bikes everywhere. Ross's radio was a crystal set which had one station. He brought comics from a local book shop, McGoldricks he thinks, weekly such as famous ones like Roy of the Rovers. Nowadays they might be called graphic novels or stories. Ross made model planes from Airfix kits. The Armstrong family were fortunate that they did have a car, however. Schoolchildren obtained train and bus free tickets to go to school and travel to sports games on Saturdays. Overall, Ross looks back at the Tawa he grew up in as a fun and safe place with lots of local friends. He and friends may have done a few naughty things, nothing destructive, only escapades like jumping the fence and having a late-night swim in the Tawa School pool.

Ross never really left Tawa, he had a short OE in 72-23 and two years in Japan 81-83 for NZ Dairy Board work. Anne and Ross's OE (overseas experience) was a bit of a honeymoon trip. They visited the USA and Ireland on the way to the UK then worked in London before doing the VW Camper trip around Europe with some school mates. Their time in Japan in the early 1980s with two young daughters was an amazing time. Many friends were made, both Japanese and Expats. Also, Nola and Eldon visited as did sister Julie's family. Work wise Ross was fortunate to see much of Japan and also have regular trips to South Korea, which was just after the night curfew was stopped. Anne and Ross returned in 2024 there for Anne's first visit since Ross ended his Dairy Board in Japan 1983. As an adult living in Tawa Ross was mostly in Wellington with NZ Dairy Board, 36 years, and 5 years with

Motor Sport NZ as GM of the FIA affiliated organisation for regulations of motorsport in NZ.

Though he scored first try for Tawa at Kowhai Park when about seven, not too many came his way after that. As an adult Ross played senior rugby for Tawa at lock mainly in senior 3rds and then when Tawa gained promotion to senior 2nd where I mainly played at number 8. He was coached by Graeme Mexted in those days. Graeme Mexted, an All Black 1950 - 51 was the father of Murray a great number 8 All Black and Alan a Wellington representative. Ross coached the rugby under 21s team for 1980-81 and played social cricket.

Ross was a foundation member of Rotaract and served on the Saint Francis Xavier Board prior to establishment of "Tomorrow's Schools" in 1989. He has been on the committee of the MG Car Club Wellington Centre from the mid-1980s and chaired the MG Classic Race committee which organised the largest ever race meeting held in New Zealand, plus MG Nationals held in Wairarapa in 2004 and 2012. He also supported Tawa Christmas parades with MGs and Mustangs. Currently Ross is a Trustee for Tawa Community Patrol and on the committee of Tawa Probus.

Ross grew up with cars, dad Eldon was a car person and Ross followed this on from his Dad. Ross's first MG was obtained in 1968, thanks to his grandmother's legacy. Since then, MGs have been part of Ross and Anne's life. The MG community, New Zealand wide, is very strong and they have made many friends and travelled all over the country MG'ing. In 2025 they own a couple of special MGs, a 1950 MGTD that took part in the Daily Express 1000 mile rally in November 1950, known as Clementine, and a 2014 MG ZT-T 260, one of 110 ever built in that format by MG with Mustang running gear.

Anne and Ross have lived in two houses in Tawa the first was in Larsen Crescent 1974-81 which they outgrew and then current house in Coates Street. Anne purchased the Coates St house while Ross was traveling overseas in Taiwan. A drive on, with a garage workshop was his requirement. That was in 1981, the year Ross got posted to Japan. On our return we remodelled it, more bedrooms and a bigger garage. Graeme Sutton, a well-known local builder and friend, did the work after Anne had put her design skills to work.

Anne and Ross's children are three girls: Lucy 25 June 1979; Jane 15 June 1981 and Elizabeth 7 September 1985. Lucy and husband Mike, married 8 December 2012, live in Eastbourne UK, and have two daughters Georgina 16 September 2016 and Jimima 21 June 2019. Jane and Patrick, married 11 February 2017, live in Tawa, 299 meters away with daughters Bonnie 18 March 2015 and Frieda .8 May 2017. Elizabeth and Christopher, married 10 July 2013, live in the Wairarapa with sons Francis 29 June 2018 and Wilfred 23 December 2021.

Looking at Tawa today Ross describes it as a great little village sitting between two cities. It has easy public transport and a good community atmosphere. The cons are it is still attached to Wellington City Council when as the Tawa Borough Council we were very self-sufficient. And there are too many vape outlets and maybe too many takeaways rather than good shops.



Enjoying a Motorkhana



Motorkhana MG Nationals 2004



Abby leaving the Cloud



Safety Car