

## **Paradise on Motuihe Island; The Memories of Eileen Slark**

**Interviewed by Peter Barron on 23 September 2013**

Eileen Slark was the wife of Tony Slark the last doctor on Motuihe and he was also a pioneer in diving medicine. Tony became the first and only patron of the Motuihe Trust.

Cindy was six months old when we went to Motuihe. That was in October of 1957. We went to Motuihe on the car ferry. We didn't have a car to take down, but from memory that's what we went on. I suppose it was because we had all our belongings with us etcetera. We arrived at this very basic little house but it was very near the beach and it had everything we needed. We were young and we just loved it. We settled in and I can't say that Tony was overworked there. He had morning surgery and dealt with all that he had to, and while he was there he did the Naval diving course. That's when he qualified as a diver and just started to go out with some of the New Zealand underwater people, at that stage never thinking that it would become a main interest at all. He passed his diving test, and that was done in summer. It wasn't too bad apart from diving in the Naval dockyard where he said you could hold your hand up and not see it. But it was all good practice.

I used to make bread on the island because the only bread we could get were these huge loaves of Naval cut bread and I thought "I can do better than that". So I was the breadmaker at that stage but Tony took over later on. The farmer - Roy Ward - used to come down at weekends. He had a cow and he brought a gin bottle full of cream. All you had to do was whisk it up. So at weekends we had waffles for breakfast. In summer we sometimes had all our meals outside because Roy Ward and Tony built a barbeque and Tony started his vegetable garden. We had a play pen for Cindy and a little paddle pool and it just was paradise.

The brewing was always done in the wash room, in what used to be the old copper. We cleaned it up and the home brew was all we drank on the island. The only person who wouldn't drink it was Roy. We bought a bottle of whisky for him which we could ill afford at that time. We had a twin basin and a wringer between to do the laundry in, and that was in the wash room too. That was for washing the bottles, and laundry and washing nappies and we had one of those Hill rotating clothes lines. So that's how our time joggled along. Then I got pregnant again and we had to be off the island three weeks before the baby was due so I came to stay with some naval friends. Johnny was duly borne and on the auspicious day when we went home, Tony having deposited me home went off racing with Roy Ward around the island. It was a beautiful summer's day and that's how life started on the island with two children.

I remember distinctly Johnny getting chicken pox and Cindy getting it too, and going down to the beach thinking "Keep away from all the other children". We sat under the pohutukawa trees and the children would paddle in the water and played and slept under the tree and we'd go home in the evening and it was quite a good way to have chicken pox.

Tony had to have his garden in straight rows. There was no way a carrot was allowed to grow in the wrong place. The garden was fenced off and the rabbits couldn't get in but it was the pigs over in the back of the garden that we were more worried about. I don't know if the fence went down deep enough but we didn't have a rabbit problem. We latterly had a pig problem because the pigs got into the garden and that was the end of our garden. This was a wonderful way to live. We had days in summer – day after day – when you got up in your swimming costume and sun hat, and you had waffles and cream for breakfast, and you a salad from the garden for lunch and Roy and Tony had built this barbeque so we had steak and salad for the evening meal. all outside.

It was just an amazing life. We'd pick up cones and logs for the fire place. I don't think we ever had coal; we just burned what we picked up. The house boys would come in the mornings sometimes. They were boys in training who came to do jobs for you, two or three mornings a week. They would cut up kindling and perhaps bring in the logs for the fire. They were quite handy for outside jobs. I think Tony got them onto digging the garden and that sort of thing, They were boys of fifteen or sixteen and they were on the island for three months. That's why they had a doctor on the island because they'd had some case where – of course there weren't helicopters and things – and it was long way by boat for somebody who was really sick. I think it was appendicitis but I'm not completely sure. It hit the papers because they were our fine young men in training with no doctor on the island and no way of getting off quickly. So that's how having doctors on the island started. I think they were three or maybe four before us so it must have happened in the late forties or early fifties when the incident happened.

The children went to school on Motutapu. The morning boat took the children over to Islington Bay and the head master and the only teacher - his wife helped him - drove around and picked them up from the jetty. That meant he could keep his school open because they had to have about nine pupils. So there were about four or five from Motuihe all the time we were there. That was wonderful for them. The wife used to take sports and sewing for the girls, and he did all the rest of the teaching. The school was right on Home Bay so it was a beautiful situation.

The diving medicine was really interesting because at that time New Zealanders were really diving too deeply. There were divers who went well down below 500 feet - I think they are not allowed to go deeper than 30 metres now - and quite a few of them got into trouble. You'd hear over the radio that they were transferring the diver to the chamber. They didn't have a helicopter at the time so they would transfer the diver by ambulance. One, who became a close friend of ours, dived at the Pinnacles at the Poor Knights. He dived too deep because it was a beautiful day and the water was so clear that it was quite off-putting. Our family was at Tutukaka and Tony was up at the Knights when he had this call to ask if he could come and see this sick diver. The sick diver had to get back from the Knights, which was a good hour and a half away, and the ambulance was waiting. The lady who ran the store did the radio telephone and phoned for the ambulance, then she phoned me to say Tony wasn't coming back today because he's going back with this sick diver. Tony came all the way down in the ambulance with him and got him into the chamber as quickly as they could, but our friend still got a bad bend from it and he never fully recovered. It was Tony's era that made the rules and now there aren't nearly as many sick divers as there used to be. The chamber is used much more for wound healing and gas gangrene. The divers still come but the diving rules are very strict. It's interesting that the chamber has just moved from being the Naval chamber to being with the Waitemata District Health. Apparently it has only got about another three

years of use left because of metal fatigue. The plan is to move it from the Navy base where it still is, to North Shore Hospital. At the hand-over ceremony the chap Jonathon who was ICU Chief Doctor, and who is a diver, will be in charge of it. So what will happen in three years time will be very interesting to see.

Tony did fourteen years in general practice then went back into the Navy again. They wanted him to do the chamber again and they offered him quite a big promotion to come back. I remember him saying "What do you think I should do?" and my replying "I'm not going there, Tony. You've got to do it". He decided to go back to the Navy and I don't think he was ever sorry about it. He was made the Surgeon Captain, and then went on to work in Wellington as the Surgeon Commodore, but the best thing that happened is that he got some really good doctors into the Navy.

The chamber is Tony's physical legacy and is named after him. I was pleased when I went to the ceremony to find that it is still called the Slark Decompression Chamber. What will happen when the new one is built I don't know but it is a facility that we need to keep. There's one at Auckland Hospital and there's one at Christchurch but there aren't a lot of them. I think New Zealand was one of the first countries to do that depth of diving and gain that depth of experience so that now there is so much more knowledge.

Eileen Slark