

A memoir of attending the Motuihe Sunshine Health camp in 1937 by Len Gale recorded in 2010

My new friend Tommy Hayes and I are in the same class [Standard 4A 1937] so it was natural that we would both apply to go to the Health Camp on Motuihe Island. This meant I would have two weeks holiday in sea air and sun. My father made me a seaman's canvas bag, brass eyelets and a rope tie. It was with great excitement that about 80 skinny boys marched up the Baroona's gangplank. The fastest ferry on the Waitemata heightened our joy. The camp on the island is a Naval base. They even call the island a ship! We slept in the barracks and ate huge meals in the sailor's mess rooms. Our morning snack was a round of French toast. There were doses of brimstone and treacle to make sure we were regular. Of course we were soon homesick. Some boys punched others to get around the problem, while others sang lonesome songs. I got into a fight with a boy who had made a wooden knife. He managed to cut my eyelid. One of the nurses took me in her arms to the sick bay. Blood everywhere, real drama! More than that I would not tell who had the knife. You just don't nark. I became an instant hero. Big boys would give me a friendly punch on the shoulder and say 'Good on ya blue'. I was glad to see the knife thrown into the campfire that night. It also meant that I got a turn at an elaborate game of cricket. A long stick for the bat and a short one for the ball. The 'ball' was placed over a shallow hole and flicked up with the bat. The score was counted by the distance the 'ball' went as measured by lengths of the 'bat'. The camp was situated near a narrow neck of land with a calm beach on one side and an ocean beach on the other. We had a choice of beaches but towards the end of our stay we favoured the calm beach. That's where the wharf is and the way home. At last singing 'It's a long way to Tipperary' and 'Show me the way to go home' we trooped aboard the Baroona. How she sped across the harbour passing yachts and scows. Those wonderful little ships loaded with shingle, cattle or logs. The scow men waved, they would no doubt know we were from the Health Camp. Oh the joy of seeing my father on the wharf. With my kit bag on my shoulder we walked to the tram stop in Custom Street. Once on the safety zone we awaited the Avondale tram that would take us to Kingsland Dad listened as my adventures came rushing out, all jumbled and important to me. Then a welcome home that brought happy tears to my eyes and I found it hard to speak. My sailor's kit bag on my bed I knew I was home. Tommy's family moved away during the following year. Poor people when the rent was overdue moved to another house, usually in the night. It is called a midnight flit. The camp was a great adventure but family ties are stronger. The sighing of pines when the wind blows, always takes me back to Motuihe.