

## DISASTER AT WHITE ISLAND - PLANT AND MEN OVER-WHELMED

21 September 1914 - Bay of Plenty Times

Apparently the greatest eruption in the Dominion since Tarawera on June 10, 1886, occurred at White Island presumably last Thursday week when a dense volume of black smoke was seen rising from the island.

The Island is worked by the White Island Sulphur Company which had an extensive plant there and quarters for a manager and about ten men. Supplies for the Island are sent from Opotiki about once a fortnight and Mokomoko, launch proprietor, of Opotiki, went on his regular trip on Tuesday last, but having no dingy was unable to land and could not attract any attention. He concluded the men were absent on another part of the island and did not notice any change in its aspect.

He returned to Opotiki and proceeded to the island again on Saturday morning. Mokomoko landed and found a scene of desolation on the works site previously occupied by the camp, and the area in the vicinity of the lake. The effect of the eruption seems to have been to throw the whole hillside overlooking the large lake and camp into the lake and over the whole surrounding area, completely burying the works, dwellings, boats, small wharf and all the inhabitants.

Mokomoko reports no sign of life at all on that part of the island and 20 feet of debris covers where the camp stood. He returned to Opotiki and reported the disaster.

As far as can be ascertained there were eight men, on the island. The only names obtainable are A. J Mckimb, the manager who hails from Scotland, and Steve Young, of Opotiki. Six others, who arrived from Auckland recently and their names are unknown at Opotiki.

It was at first reported that Mr Rhodes, the former manager, and his wife were on the island, but it is now practically certain that they left by the Rosamond, which often calls at the Island, some weeks ago.

Lately fumes of sulphur have been particularly noticeable along the coast from Matata to Opotiki and the Island has never before been seen to be so active as the day the disaster is supposed to have occurred.

It is worthy of note that a fresh cold water spring on a farm four miles below Te Toko, which lies in a valley in a direct line between Mount Tarawera and White Island, has been transformed into a boiling spring within the past week.

Later advices from Opotiki show that when Mokumoku reached the Island on Tuesday it was dark, he got no response to his hails and as the wind was rising he decided to return to Opotiki. On reaching the Island on Saturday he noticed material alteration, and on landing found that the Island had changed to such an extent as to be almost unrecognisable.

The wharf had been swept away by a huge mud wave which had encroached into the sea as far as the eye could discern the bottom, while of the four boats no sign was seen.

Further inspection showed that a huge cliff on top of the blowhole had slipped and filled up the lake which had completely vanished, and had been replaced by an immense hill.

The camp was obliterated, the buildings being buried in about twenty feet of sulphurous mud.

## NO HOPE OF ANY SURVIVORS

Opotiki, Sept 21, 12 50 p.m  
Opotiki, Sept 21

The search party has returned. they found the buildings covered with 20 feet of mud and boulders. The old crater has filled up. Two new craters have burst open. There is absolutely no hope of any survivors.

Col Ward explains that the craters mentioned above will be fumaroles similar to the old ones that have been blocked up.

## POSSIBLE CAUSE

This morning a reporter of the Bay Of Plenty Times interviewed Colonel G. Arnold Ward who has always taken the keenest interest in seismic and volcanic phenomena .

In reply to a question as to the probable cause of the disaster, Col Ward said that in the absence of details it was only possible to give a conjecture; White

Island he said, is the most consistently active of New Zealand's volcanoes though in a quiet way. The island is the summit of a volcano submerged more than half its height, and may be compared to a hollow tooth being merely a shell of cliffs from 200 to 800 feet high surrounding an oblong crater. The floor of the crater stands a fair height above sea level generally, and is accessible through two breaks in the crater wall at the south east end.

The crater is roughly half a mile by a quarter of a mile wide, with a small lake and several fumaroles. The water of the lake is very strongly impregnated with hydrochloric acid and has a very high temperature; This lake has been considerably drained away by the Company now working the sulphur deposits. In many places, from top to bottom, the crater walls are dotted with steam jets, strongly impregnated with acid gasses. It therefore follows that the rocks and debris composing the walls will be in an unstable condition owing to decomposition by acid vapour, and falls or landslips will be liable to occur from time to time; the actual time of any such fall will probably often be determined by the occurrence of one of the minor tremors to which the island is frequently subject.

Considerable eruptions of steam occur at intervals, most frequently about this time of year. I have measured several such, said the Colonel, with instruments, as regards the height of the steam column, and have found the same to be frequently from six to nine thousand feet. The highest I have recorded yet was on May 26th the current year. From the evidence available I attribute the present disaster to a fall of cliff debris due to the natural causes mentioned above, the so called black smoke, recorded as having been seen from the mainland, being simply the immense volume of fine dust which would naturally follow a big fall, and which would be carried to a great height by the steam and hot air which are always rising from the crater. Certainly there has been no eruption of magnitude, or earth tremors would have been felt throughout the Bay of Plenty at least. I have not seen any evidence of abnormal activity for some weeks past, nor felt any tremor.

Whether the sulphur mining operations or the partial draining of the lake have had anything to do with the disaster it is impossible to say without further information, but as all hands appear to have been buried, it seems likely that the disaster occurred without any premonitory signs and at a

time when the men were at a meal or gathered at their quarters for some similar purpose, and that it did not occur during working hours. With regard to the reported outbreak of a hot spring on the mainland, while such is not impossible I am inclined at present to regard it simply as a coincidence if true, but we must remember that all sorts of rumours always crop up about a disaster such as the present.

PDF prepared by David de la Hyde - March 2017