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Life Story

Joseph and Theresa Risi's rewarding life on the land.

Joseph Risi was three years old when he arrived in NZ in August 1939, accompanied by his parents, Walter and Marie Risi and older brothers Oswald and Walter. The family settled on a dairy farm in Ohangai, Taranaki on farm worker's wages of 16 pound per month. The family moved on to become 50% sharemilkers and Walter (snr) decided to purchase some pedigree pigs and began breeding and showing them at various shows, winning many medals, cups and ribbons. While they lived in Taranaki, Joe's father Walter was instrumental in forming the Taranaki Swiss Club.

In 1954 the rapidly expanding NZ Co-operative Dairy Company in the Waikato was looking for someone to manage its pig farm at Taupiri. They offered Walter (snr) and his now adult sons a managerial position but Walter insisted on a 50/50 partnership. Contract duly signed, the family moved to the Waikato.

Pigs had always been Walter's passion and in partnership with his now adult sons, they began a breeding program with imported boars, a costly business, with some exceptional pedigree boars fetching up to \$1000. Imported stock arrived from England and was quarantined in Wellington for 30 days. In 1960, Joe alongside his brothers and parents, was heavily involved with the establishing of a highly efficient housing complex for the pigs. This even included a modern office where the all-important breeding records were housed.

It was around this time that a young lady by the name of Theresa von Holzen arrived from Switzerland. Theresa, the oldest of nine, had decided to take a break from her seasonal jobs. These consisted of helping her parents during the height of the farming season, from spring to autumn, and then during winter months working as a waitress at a nearby ski resort. She diligently saved and planned a 1-2 year OE without telling her father until she had booked and paid for the trip - her first trip in 28 years. Theresa had initially wanted to go to Canada, but visas were hard to get and her mother mentioned the Risi family that they knew in NZ. On arrival in NZ, Theresa, who had already learnt English while in England, quickly secured a job as a waitress at Hamilton Hotel (5-star rated) and within 3 weeks became head waitress. She felt she was in heaven as she now worked only 8 hours a day after years of working 12 hour days!!! She did struggle with the kitchen chaos, the unpunctuality of the people both in the hotel industry and outside of it, but with time she adjusted and enjoyed her time at the hotel interspersed with visits to Mountley Piggery where she got to know the reserved young gentleman, Joe, whom she married in 1963.

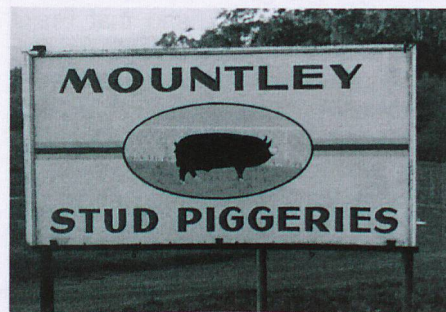
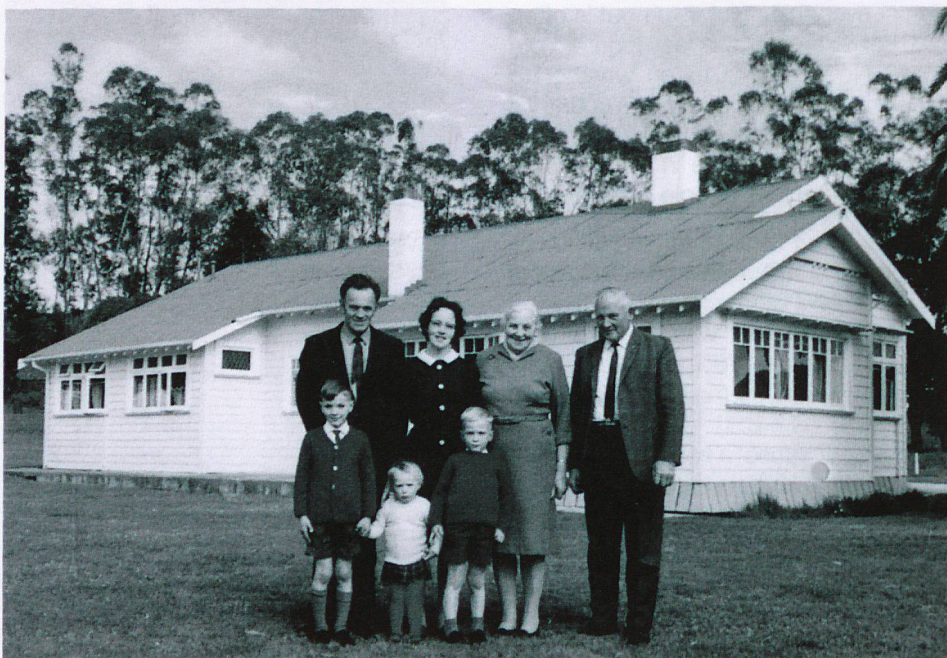
Joe by now was in charge of the stock at Mountley Stud where nearly 4000 baconers were sold annually. The Large White and Landrace breeds made up 90% of the stud, with Berkshires making up the balance. Within a few years they

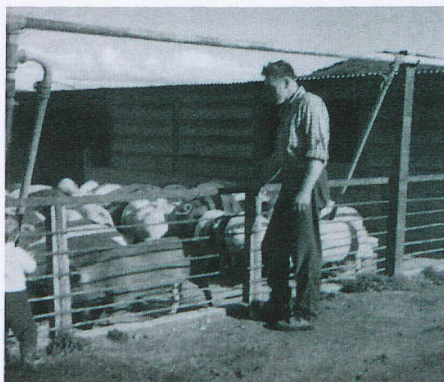


were exporting pigs to Australia, Fiji, Malaysia, Philippines, Tahiti, Thailand, Tonga and Western Samoa. The breeding initiative that the Risis practised at Taupiri brought fame to Mountley Stud Piggeries. This piggery was the first in NZ to use artificial breeding in pigs. Always quick to take on new initiatives, they were quick to see the benefit of the Sonatest Ultrasonic machine which measured the depth of meat and fat on live pigs- an invaluable tool for breeding purposes!!

The main source of feed for the pigs was whey from the Orini factory, and this was supplemented by flume washings which came from the giant Te Rapa milk powder factory. The diversification of farmers towards cereal crops brought about the erection of several large grain silos. Joe and his father made meal themselves from the grain. At its peak the piggery employed 6 people.

During these years at Mountley Stud, Walter (snr) and Mr Arnold Biland formed the Hamilton Swiss





Club and many readers will still hold fond memories of the "Schwingen" competitions, the "Trachtentanze" and other cultural pursuits that occurred at the Swiss Picnics held on the large lawns of the Risi residence at The Mountley Piggeries. Joe told me that all the family would be roped in to help prepare for these events.

By the mid-60s change was in the wind and by 1965 Joe's brothers had left Mountley Stud to become dairy farmers. Joe stayed on and continued with his father, but with his own growing family and his parents nearing retirement age, the economics of staying at the piggery needed to be weighed up and Joe dreamt of going beef farming. Unfortunately those sums didn't stack up either, and they decided in 1973 to go dairy farming, taking their four young children Peter, Stephen, Marianne and Barbara to their first dairy farm in Cambridge where they started with 80 cows. The peat and scrub land needed lots of attention and work. Developing this land was constant but it was their land and they enjoyed the challenge.

In 1980 they sold up and at Maungatautari, Cambridge they purchased a 450 acre farm with steep sidlings and fenced into only 5 paddocks. This farm presented a challenge, but they were used to challenges, and with Lake Karapiro to gaze upon while working, the years flew by. Theresa had always loved trees and they planted many throughout the farm, including radiata pine on the steeper slopes.

In 1999 their hard work was recognised when they entered, and to their surprise won, Livestock Improvement Best Dairy Farm Award which had major sponsorship from Environment Waikato. This award is for farmers who run their farms in a clean, environmentally healthy way, with excellent effluent and pasture

management. The judges were looking for farm managers with a clear vision and they spent three hours walking the property and talking to Joe and Theresa. They were impressed with the condition of the cattle, the weed control, their tree planting, and their silviculture practice (the art of controlling the establishment, growth, composition, health, and quality of forests to meet diverse needs and values).

During their farming years they enjoyed occasional trips to Switzerland. They retired to Cambridge in 2011 after 38 years of farming, knowing that the farm they had created would be well looked after by their son Stephen, his wife Raewyn and their three school aged children. They have other family nearby, with their oldest son Peter and his wife Vicky farming at Whitehall. Their three children are at University in Christchurch. Daughter Marianne and husband Rob and their two children live in Tauranga where Marianne is a Dietician working at



the Tauranga Hospital. Their other daughter Barbara is an Ecologist living at Mt Manganui.

Joe and Theresa are very proud of what they and their family have, and continue to achieve. Now their life is spent enjoying time with friends and family.

Compiled by daughter Barbara and editor Heidi.



Theresa and Joe Risi admire the lush, green pastures of their dairy farm which won the 1999 Livestock Dairy Farm Award.

Maungatautari farm wins award

Joe and Theresa Risi said they were honoured to win the 1999 Livestock Improvement Best Dairy Farm Award which is run on

an annual basis. "It was a real surprise," Mrs Risi said.

This was the first time the couple had entered the competition, although

friends had been encouraging them for some years.

Mr Risi said although the farm may have looked ready to enter, there was still a fair amount of work to be done on the property.

"Two years ago we weren't ready. We had a major project on the farm and it wasn't quite finished." But their patience paid off, winning this year's title.

The Risi family have been on their property for the past 18 years with their two sons.

Their farm is not the typical dairy farm - it has steep hills and gullies running down to Lake Karapiro.

During the judging, head judge, Gordon Stephenson

said he was impressed with the quality of the farm.

"Everything is well done. Cattle condition is excellent and silviculture very good."

On average, the judges spent three hours at the farm walking the property and talking with Mr and Mrs Risi.

The judges also found the Risis had used the land appropriately by fencing off steep land, planting radiata on steeper slopes and contour fencing of the gullies.

Production showed there were very few weeds in the pasture, and fertilising was based on the soil and pasture analysis.

The Best Dairy Farm

Award is run annually by the Farm Environment Award Trust with major sponsorship from Environment Waikato.

It looks for farms where water runs clean, soil structure supports healthy pastures, crops and stock, effluent is well managed, indigenous plants and animals of value are protected and the business is profitable.

The judges were looking for farmers with a clear vision of where they were going, how they will get there and why they are doing certain things.

Entrants were judged on how they were progressing and what they have learned, rather than how long they have been farming.

Luxton bows out of Karapiro seat

Karapiro MP, John Luxton will not defend his seat at the next election.

The Minister for Food, Fibre, Biosecurity and Border Control said the combination of his increased ministerial workload and family commitments led to his decision. "I also feel as though I'm not able to spend as much time in my electorate as much as I'd like.

"I've spread myself too thinly." Mr Luxton said he would stand as a list candidate at the next election, which would give him more time to spend on his portfolio