

AOKAUTERE MINIATURE RIFLE CLUB

1931 – 2017

The Aokautere Miniature Rifle Club (AMRC) held its first meeting in 1931, and a club was formed at the Aokautere hall by a group of men headed by the local cheese factory Manager, Mr Kristiansen.

After the necessary gear was purchased, including 4 rifles costing £7 (\$14) each, the public hall had minor alterations made which made it possible to shoot 25 yards under the stage, through the back wall, past the chimney, into a makeshift sand trap and a tunnel on tracks.

Shooting was carried out in this fashion for a short while until a more permanent range was built on the other side of the hall in the ladies' cloak room, where part of the outside wall was made to be raised and the shooters could fire their shots down a low walled tunnel to the concrete butts, into sand filled drums draped with car inner tubes, to reduce the blow-back of shrapnel.

As well as competitive shooting within their own club, there were the interclub competitions, Manawatu Champs and the North Island Championships each year. The interclub shoots were with Awahuri, Ohakea, Bulls, Sandon, Longburn, Palmerston North Club in Rangitikei Street, Linton Club in King Street, Marton, Bunnythorpe (where the range was situated beneath large whey tanks in the Glaxo factory and no doubt lying on the sometimes-wet soil made for some uncomfortable shooting), Ballance, Mako Mako and Utuwai (which was abandoned for a short while because of car sickness and the time it took to get there, shoot and get back home even without the breakdowns). Many of the shoots did not finish until late at night and, on at least one occasion it was recalled, three in the morning.

In its first years, membership fees were 1/- (10 cents) a night which paid for the hall hire, targets and supper. Ammunition was 1/3, (12 cents) for a box of 50 shots some of which left a smoky green haze that had to lift before the shot could be scoped.

From the very beginning the club membership was strong, except during the war when it was in part recess, kept going only by 3 or 4 men and a woman, Mrs Pinfold, who was not a shooter but a strong supporter. She was later made a Life Member for services during this time.

The 5 shot targets which were used earlier were required to have an extra shot and, sometimes during competitions, 3 shots were fired at the bulls which made it difficult to mark, especially if they were key holed. Later on 8 and 10 shot targets were used as well as a locally designed card which had a much smaller inner bull. Only A, B, C and D grades were shot for and it wasn't until later that a Master Grade was included. On occasions in competition, a shoot-off was necessary in a shot for shot, shoulder to shoulder fashion. This would only end after sometimes up to 50 shots were fired. Under those conditions this would be no mean feat.

Apart from ladder shooting, there were also the novelty shoots, like kneeling and lying without a sling, shooting through the back of the card, shooting with the lights out, at discs and at candle flames. All these were usually held at the conclusion of the season's shooting - much the same as today.

In the early days, as well as shooting, some of the members ran dice and Poker games which appeared often to disrupt the shooting and prolong the evening. Later this form of gambling was stopped and playing for matches was introduced to reduce the exuberance that money changing hands caused. In the ensuing years, Euchre and darts filled in the gaps, even these had to be broken up at times.

Even in its earliest years the club ran very popular dances in the local hall where a band, consisting of local residents playing a piano, cornet and violin, played into the early hours of the morning.

Many fundraising activities were used, some of which were quite novel and successful, such as farm fencing, auctions, bottle drives, Euchre and Housie, scrub cutting, laying concrete, paper drives, dances, potato picking, and flea markets to name a few, and the club received generous sports and recreation grants.

Also, over the later years many club social activities were organised such as fishing trips, children's Christmas parties, fancy dress dances, football, the yearly Awahuri Housie evening (peanut throwing!), and Manawatu and Wanganui bus trips. Hard work from enthusiastic members from the past all helped to make the club what it is today.

In 1956, a new building site for the club was offered in a disused metal pit on the Pahiatua Track on Tom Dickin's property where it was leased for a nominal fee of £5 (\$10.00) a year). The club members then proceeded to fell pine trees on Jack Atkinson's farm at the top of the Pahiatua Track, they were then taken to the local sawmill where the owner, Karl Brill, cut them into the required size planks, at the right price. After fund raising and many working bees, and the dedication and generosity of many members and supporters, a 25yard range and clubrooms was built, in the space of eighteen months, for the opening of the 1959 season.

Some materials for the building came from Palmerston North demolition jobs. It was said that the roofing iron came from the old Palmerston North library building. Much of the material was donated. The bricks for the fireplace were donated and laid by a local farmer and this was proved later to be one of the finest and efficient assets of the clubrooms, giving off it's fierce heat to warm the coldest winter nights.

Later a fence was built to keep out the farm animals which camped around and in the building area. The opossums were the hardest to keep out as they seemed to find their way into the building in many cunning ways. These furry animals would cause amusement to members when they were being captured, but sometimes chased by over-enthusiastic men who clambered over the rafters and, on one occasion, through the pinex ceiling of the kitchen. This time the animal got away, but not before it had left its mark on the finger of his attacker.

The membership of the club fluctuated between 4 or 5 during the war, up to 30 or so members. Over the years, many members have shot their way into the top at Manawatu and North Island Championships. The club possesses many fine trophies, many of which date back to the 1930s. These are contested enthusiastically each year.

It's interesting to note that the earliest Patron was the local MP Mr Linklater during the thirties and into the forties. A few select members and supporters have been elected to the positions of Patron, Life Members and Honorary Members.

1974 saw club rules changed to allow women members, of which there have been up to 5 members at times. In 1975, 16 years after the clubrooms were built, the land was purchased from the owner, making it the only club in the Manawatu to own their own property.

1975 also saw another rebuilding programme started, the old range was demolished in November and rebuilt by members by March 1976. The toilets, kitchen facilities and an extension to the main Hall were completed in time for their Golden Jubilee year celebrations in 1981.



The new range at Totara Road was built with assistance from all MSRA Clubs. Aokautere members played a big part in building the top mound and in later years helped with the bench test platform.

In the 1980s and 90s membership swelled to around 30. Given the size of other clubs like Awahuri, Interclubs went on until very late at night. One night the tea tasted rather different – a possum had expired in the water tank!

The club was very fortunate to have skilled enthusiastic members who would go above and beyond to maintain and improve the clubrooms. Notable were Lynn Carne (very fond of pink paint) and Wally Vining (roof repairs). Working Bees were always a lot of laughs.

The club stayed in touch with the local community by running social shoots. Lions, Young Farmers and the Scouts all had visits to the range. The Lions Clubs from all over the Manawatu would compete annually for the Wally Vining Trophy – his old rifle mounted on a board. They also put on an enormous supper for all those involved.

In the late 80s the Massey University Rifle Club (MUTS) started shooting at the Aokautere range. This was a mutually beneficial arrangement – a great boost in numbers for Aokautere and much appreciated mentoring and coaching for the MUTS members. The members from Massey played an important part in running the club and attracting new members. They also went on to achieve very well at National and International levels.

A 75 Year Anniversary event was organised in 2006. This was a low-key affair with past and present members invited to have a shoot at the range one Saturday.

Sadly, membership dwindled to the point where there was sometimes only one turning up on a Monday night. 2017 was the last season shot at the Aokautere range. The remaining members either stopped altogether or joined the Rongotea Club. The land will be disposed of, and the proceeds will be used to benefit Manawatu smallbore shooting. Historical documents and memorabilia have been preserved. It is planned to build a cabinet at the MSRA range to display the old AMRC trophies.