

NEW ZEALAND / COUNTRY

Land Girl: Centenarian's lessons from a lifetime of farming

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By **Anna Brankin** (Kāi Tahu, Kāti Māmoe), *Shepherdess**



"I really love gardening and I'm proud of my garden. We've got a very nice gardening club here. We meet once a month and have speakers occasionally. We made posies the other day for the hospital. I used to grow a lot of vegetables as well, but I get Meals on Wheels now." Photo: Shepherdess / Nancy Zhou

High up on the Kaikōura Peninsula, with panoramic views of snowcapped mountains, lush farmland and sparkling ocean, lives a remarkable woman whose life stretches across more than a century.

Jill McKenzie has packed an awful lot of living into her 101 years. These days, you'll still find her zipping around town in her trusty car, Bluebell, or whipping up a batch of cheese scones in the kitchen - and she's always happy to sit down with a cup of tea and share some of the stories she's collected over her lifetime.

"I have very happy memories of my childhood," Jill says.

"I was born in Christchurch, but the first years of my life were spent at Balmoral Station in the Mackenzie."

Jill's father drew Balmoral Station when the high country sheep runs were cut up and balloted after World War I, and the family enjoyed several years there before deciding to sell up. They moved to Te Pātaka o Rakaihautū Banks Peninsula for a short time, before eventually buying a farm in the small settlement of Cave, just inland of Timaru.

"I remember going to school at Diamond Harbour for just a little while, before we moved to Cave.

"After that I did go to the little school in Cave until it closed down and we all had to catch the bus to Pleasant Point. Then for high school, I boarded at Rangī Ruru in Christchurch for a couple of years and then at Craighead in Timaru."

Jill's rural upbringing instilled in her a profound sense of connection to the land, and she was never happier than when she was outdoors working with animals. These days, she says she probably would have pursued a career in farming straight from school, but there were fewer options open to young women back then.

So, against the backdrop of World War II - which began around the time she finished high school - Jill found herself back in Ōtautahi Christchurch for a short-lived stint at nursing school.

"I got through the first part of my course but then I got scarlet fever very badly, and spent about three months in Burwood Hospital.

"It was ghastly. They sent me back to nursing school when I was recovered and I promptly got chicken pox. So the nursing career didn't last."

Although the war years weren't without their difficulties - Jill remembers petrol shortages, and her mother fretting when she wasn't able to travel to Christchurch when Jill was in hospital - they also brought opportunities for young women. In 1941, with so many men otherwise occupied with the war effort, the Canterbury Agricultural College at Lincoln offered a six-week course in farm instruction for women.

The 22 women who participated became known as the Land Girls. They learned everything from managing and feeding animals, milking cows, driving tractors and other farm machinery to harvesting crops. At just 18, Jill was the youngest of the Land Girls.



"I grew up in a simpler time," says Jill. "Things seem to have gotten a little faster. Everything's so hectic somehow. I think I was lucky to grow up when I did, although I am glad for Sky Sport and my microwave." Photo: Sheperdess / Nancy Zhou

"I really loved my time at Lincoln. I enjoyed the sheep work most of all, and I wasn't so keen on the dairy. When the course finished, the chap who'd taken it actually wanted me to stay on. He could see it would be useful, because all the boys were still away at the war."

The request for Jill to stay on and look after the sheep on the farm was duly made to Professor Eric R. Hudson, the director of the college, who reportedly replied that it would be far too much responsibility to have a woman.

"I thought, 'how feeble,'" Jill says.



After the earthquake in 2016, Jill's concerned family organised a helicopter to get her out, but she didn't want to leave Kaikōura. "The earthquake in 2016 was awful. I was watching TV and it went funny and I thought, 'What's wrong with it?' Suddenly I realised the whole house was shaking. I rushed and sat on the seat outside and a neighbour came to check on me, but I refused to leave."

Photo: Sheperdess / Nancy Zhou

Not to be deterred, Jill went on to spend many years working on farms throughout the Canterbury region, notably for Donald Burnett at Mount Cook Station and for the Hamilton family at Irishman Creek Station - both of which took her back to Te Manahuna the Mackenzie Basin and the striking landscapes of her childhood.

"There was hardly anything down there in the way of houses or townships.

"Just these huge open spaces. It was very, very beautiful."

Jill describes herself as a jack of all trades, helping with anything and everything, but her favourite task was stockwork, especially the horseback musters up in the high country. Eventually, Jill returned to Cave and took over the daily management of the family farm, running it for about a decade and proving once and for all that women could absolutely hold their own in the farming industry.

It was during this time that friends introduced her to Wilson Mackenzie, a widower from Dorie in mid-Canterbury.

"He was a very nice man. He used to come down to Cave every Sunday. We were married in Timaru and went to Nelson for a sort of honeymoon before my life at Dorie began."

At 43, Jill became a wife, and a stepmother to Wilson's three children, all of whom were at boarding school at the time.

"It was a very busy time. I cooked the meals which was new for me," she laughs.

"Fortunately we had married people working for us, so it was just my husband, and I cooked for any strays that came, of course."

She did a lot of the sheep work on the farm and her favourite time of year was always lambing season.

"I had a special shed and I used to mother on lambs in there. I loved saving every lamb possible."

Although the days were busy, Jill and Wilson found time for their favourite hobby - a game of bridge.

"We used to drive 29 miles at night after working all day, just to play bridge in Ashburton,

"When we moved, Wilson said, 'We'd better start a bridge club in Kaikōura.' We had a very nice friend, Eileen Knight, who came up and helped us set it up."

The Kaikōura Bridge Club now meets twice a week at Takahanga Bowling Club, and you can still find Jill there every Monday afternoon. She says that the key to a good bridge partner is "to be able to agree happily" which is perhaps why she and Wilson loved playing together for many years.

Although his passing in 2009 was a huge loss, Jill says she has continued to find enjoyment in the small things: pottering in her garden, spending time with family and friends, and getting out and about.

As she looks back on her life, Jill says that her biggest lesson is a simple one: "Just enjoy it."

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"I used to go down to Arrowtown and Queenstown in autumn because I just love the colours," says Jill. "We don't get the same colours here but we do have the mountains and the blue sky."

Photo: Sheperdess / Nancy Zhou