

# Passing of a character

**Nigel Johnson**  
1934 – 2004

**N**igel Johnson, a former NZ Forest Service Second-in-Charge of Kaikohe District Office and member of the Institute of Forestry, died in Kawa Kawa hospital on 30 June 2004.

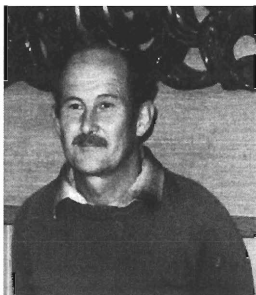
He was born at Rawene and his parents farmed near Kaikohe on the Remuera estate. He spent much of his life in the north and had a deep knowledge of the area, its history and its people. Joining the Forest Service in 1952, his training followed the usual practice of the time with block courses in Rotorua interspersed with frequent transfers between forests to gain work experience, working in Waipoua, Esk, Eyrewell and Ashley Forests in the mid 1950s. This was followed by a period of timber cruising in the Ureweras.

He spent several periods working overseas. First in Australia in 1957, when together with Mike Hetherington, he worked in such jobs as post splitting. In the early sixties he was seconded to NZ Foreign Affairs, spending two years in Kenya as part of an aid assistance programme working with Ted Rooney and Warren Ellis. He went to Canada for a year and worked for MacMillan Bloedel. Returning from Canada, he spent a brief period with Staff Training Section at Head office before returning north.

The major part of his Forest Service career was spent in the north and he supervised the first tree planting at Aupouri Forest in 1962. He was involved with the indigenous forest survey and logging operations at Omahuta, Puketi, Wara Wara and Herekino Forests, which, by the end of the late seventies were drawing to a close. He was closely involved with salvage logging of dead kauri and in what was some of the earliest helicopter logging carried out in New Zealand. He had a deep knowledge of and close links with the kauri utilisation industry, notably with Kaitaia Timber Company, Lane and Sons at Totara North and latterly with the Bergmans of Ormrarhoe.

He had an irascible, irreverent, and unharnessed nature, which together with an astute mind, was the cause of amusement and frequent practical jokes. His irreverent nature was well illustrated at a funeral held in a recent year. After a graveside service with hymns and address, there was a period of silence while the casket was lowered into the grave by means of some sort of electro-mechanical hoist. In the period of silence, Nigel chose to inject some levity into the occasion by demanding loudly from the back of the crowd: "Say has that thing got a reverse gear for the resurrection?"

On another occasion, one Kaikohe office



member, boasting too often on the size of his feijoas, arrived home to find his tree hung with green plastic footballs. Inside one was a note: "nice one Dave". Reprisals were frequent and especially successful ones were regarded in those simpler days as being a boasting matter. Many are ribald and utterly unprintable. The then increasing availability of photocopy and fax machines ensured a wider distribution of Nigelisms from which not even the Director General was immune from receiving. Nigel's contacts in Head Office invariably led to such missives as "The Tale of the Crispy Kraut", a humorous saga recalling the destruction by fire of a hut in Russell Forest by a German backpacker, being inevitably slipped under Andy's door.

Nigel had a strong sense of loyalty to staff and workers of the Forest Service. He could be relied on to find a solution to rehabilitate those who strayed. Whether they had been convicted of something as serious as manslaughter or were simply too deep in the cups. He was well respected for his deep knowledge, honesty, pastoral and pragmatic approach.

His relationship with Maori epitomised his relationship with life in general. While occasionally taking the mickey out of Maori and things Maori, he had a special love for the genuine people, especially Googie Pene and his whanau at Russell Forest. Most Maori tolerated his idiosyncrasies better than his fellow pakeha.

In the early eighties the Forest Service, along with the public service generally was undergoing a period of radical change. The American business paradigm was developing quickly and also an increasing focus on the environment with consultation and political correctness. With development of more field stations, specialisation and increasing levels of delegation, District Office was for him becoming less relevant and Nigel became increasingly frustrated with his position and the future role it offered him. He took the decision in September 1985 to take early retirement after 33 years service.

In retrospect, the decision to retire was probably the correct one in light of his frustration, old-fashioned values and unwillingness to change. He was an unlikely candidate for a public service course on gender awareness and sexual harassment.

Nigel is survived by his wife Judy and his children; Kenneth, Rosemary and Sam of whose achievements he was especially proud.

**Maurice Williamson**