

**Resource Community Formation & Change:**  
**A Case Study of**  
**OHAI**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper reports the findings of a case study of Ohai in Western Southland in the southern part of the South Island of New Zealand. It is one of a series of three case studies of mining communities in New Zealand which are part of a project entitled "Resource Community Formation and Change" that has been funded by the Foundation for Research, Science and Technology. The other two case studies of mining communities in this series are Waihi (WP 9) in the Hauraki District of the North Island, and Rununga, situated in a coal mining area on the West Coast of the South Island (WP 10). Additional Southland case studies include the forestry community of Tuatapere (WP 8) and the agricultural town of Otautau (WP 15).

A variety of research methods were used in this case study which focuses on changes in Ohai and the surrounding district over the past 20 or so years. These methods included an analysis of census statistics, a review of published and unpublished documents about the town and the mining sector, and five days of interviews in and around Ohai in February 1998. Data covering this area was also collected during fieldwork for the Tuatapere case study in November 1997.

## **MINING SECTOR**

### **An overview**

The following description of mining and quarrying in New Zealand has been based on an earlier working paper which examined the regional, national and international trends and linkages of the sector in New Zealand from the early 1970's to the present (Fitzgerald 1997).

The sector comprises 0.3 per cent of New Zealand enterprises (652) and 0.3 per cent of employment. Enterprises in this sector have an average of just over seven workers compared with just under six workers for all sectors combined. Mining and quarrying accounts for a slowly increasing proportion of GDP; from 1.2 per cent in the 1987/88 year to 1.8 per cent in the 1992/93 year due largely to the development of large gold and silver mines at Waihi and Golden Cross in the Hauraki District, and at Macraes in Central Otago. By 1995 the sector employed 4,500 people (3,800 males and 700 females), with the vast majority of them (91 per cent) working for private corporations.

The regional significance of the mining and quarrying sector varies enormously in terms of both numbers of enterprises and the level of employment. Regions where the sector makes an important contribution to the economy are the Waikato (coal and gold), Taranaki (oil and gas), the West Coast (coal and alluvial gold mining), and Southland (coal).

### **Coal Mining**

Most of New Zealand's coal is produced from mines in the Waikato, West Coast (in the Greymouth and Buller districts) and Southland (Ohai and Nightcaps). In 1994 there were 17 operating mines in the Waikato, 28 on the West Coast (13 of which were underground mines), and 10 mines in Otago and Southland. Two-thirds of production originates from eleven mines owned by Solid Energy, a state-owned enterprise, that supplies 60 per cent of the local market (Statistics New Zealand 1997: 482). In 1997 Solid Energy directly employed over 700 people or about 17 per cent of all employment in the mining and quarrying sector (Solid Energy 1997).

Open cast mines, exploiting the surface proximity of deposits, produce over 80 per cent of the nation's coal. The importance of open pit methods has grown steadily during the 1990's with the need for high and reliable production volumes, the development of transport and civil engineering technologies, and the drive to cut the cost of production in the new corporate era. In underground mines, new techniques and technology, such as long-wall mining, road headers etc, have also reduced the cost of production.

Another recent trend in the industry has been the closure of many small private and cooperative mines - there are only 50 of these mines left out of more than 100 in the 1970's. Although some of these closures were undoubtedly the result of economic factors, others were the result of new regulations imposed on the industry by the Resource Management Act and the Occupational Safety and Health Act.

Since deregulation of the industry in the 1980's the production of coal has gradually declined. Exports of high quality coal began the previous decade, and grew eightfold between 1980 and 1994. In 1997 the government-owned company Solid Energy, and by far the industry's biggest player with an annual turnover in excess of \$200 million, exported 539,000 tonnes of coal to steel and chemical producers in Japan, Chile, India, Australia and China (Statistics New Zealand 1997: 482; Solid Energy, 1998). In Solid Energy's New Zealand market, national volumes grew by approximately 19 per cent due to higher volumes of sales to the electricity generating sector, and the cement and dairy industries. Total coal production by Solid Energy in 1997 was over 3 million tonnes.

## **COAL MINING IN THE OHAI-NIGHTCAPS DISTRICT**

### **Development**

According to Bowen (1964) the overall development of the Nightcaps/Ohai coal field, was a progression of the centre of production from east to west (i.e. Nightcaps to Ohai) caused by the working out of areas of more easily won coal in shallow deposits, rather than better quality coals found in the west. The field contains varying grades of sub-bituminous coal, with low sulphur content and low ash production.

The earliest discovery and mining of coal in the district was at Wairio in the 1850s, then in the 1860s at various locations around Nightcaps, and on Birchwood Station, at what is now Ohai. Throughout the 1870s and 80s many small private coal mines opened up at Nightcaps, some underground, and some opencast. These were independent, often family-based and generally short lived operations. Because of poor roads and difficult local terrain which made access to the Nightcaps and Wairio railheads poor, these operations were generally confined to production for local consumption.

Serious commercial development began in 1882 with the establishment of the Nightcaps Mine by the Nightcaps Coal Company. The company also laid out the town, extended the railway line 4km from Wairio to its mine, and equipped a colliery initially capable of producing 50,000 tonnes of coal per annum. At its peak, in the first decade of this century, the mine employed over a hundred workers, and produced 65,000 tonnes of coal per annum. When the mine closed in 1924 due to dwindling resources, it had produced 1.4 million tonnes of coal. Like their large neighbour, the smaller local private mines were also progressively worked out and closed by the 1920s. Despite carrying over 12,000 passengers per year and large amounts of freight and agricultural products from the farms in the district, NZ Railways refused to take over the Wairio to Nightcaps line and it was closed in 1926 and dismantled. However coal mining was developing at Ohai, with the first coal leases acquired from runholders of Birchwood and Mt Linton stations. The most notable of these first private mines were started by the Wairakei, Mt Linton and Mossbank Coal Companies which had both opencast and underground pits.

Development of these mines was severely hampered by poor roads between Ohai and the Nightcaps and Wairio railheads. The transport problem was initially solved by the building of a tramway to Nightcaps with coal being transferred by hand to NZ Railways (NZR) wagons at the railhead. Fearing competition, rail extension to the Ohai and more westerly Nightcaps mines was opposed by the Nightcaps Coal Company. Strong representations to Government in the early 1920s by the runholders who owned the Ohai mineral rights (and who received a royalty from the mines) lead to the establishment of the Ohai Railways Board and the building of a 13 km private railway line, capable of taking NZR rolling stock, between Ohai and Wairio. This was opened in 1925, and proved the catalyst for the rapid development of these new Ohai mines and others, just at a time when coal mining at Nightcaps came to an end. Redundant Nightcaps miners transferred to the Ohai mines, initially commuting from Nightcaps by road, then later by train. In addition "Geordie" miners came in from the collieries of the North of England and Southern Scotland, bringing with them the necessary mining skills to develop the coal field. Coal from these mines fed factories, the railways, domestic markets, and ships boilers in the southern part of the South Island.

To meet the increasing demand for training in mine management and the technical aspects of mining, a school of mines was started in the early 1930s, with over 20 students in the first year. Through the 1940s and 50s it had trouble getting enough student numbers and finances, and in 1960 was formally wound up.

In the early-mid 1940s, during World War II, the State Mines Department began buying up the private coal mines in the Ohai district, purchasing in close succession the various mines of the Wairakei, Mossbank, Westport (Birchwood mine), Star, and Linton coal companies. At the end of the 1940s all of the private coal mining operations at Ohai were in the hands of State Coal, and mechanised opencast mining was becoming an increasingly important mining method. One of the Mossbank mines, the "Bar 20" was the first to mechanise opencast work, making use of army-surplus earthmoving and digging equipment, until purchased by the State in 1947.

Thomson (1979) notes that the arrival of the state into mining in the district brought organisational, financial and social changes. Capital was injected into the industry, miners' working conditions improved, the work was made safer and less heavy through mechanisation, and there was a single employer who had an interest in the community's development and survival. At the same time decision making moved away from local owners and residents to bureaucrats and politicians in Wellington.

In the 1950s a number of the State-acquired pits were worked out and closed, and in their place new mines were developed, including the Morley underground mine, employing 160 miners, and various opencast workings. According to Boyle (1980), by 1955 a third of production from the mines was from opencast mining. One local ex-miner estimated there were over 500 miners employed in Ohai's state mines in the 1950s.

Wairakei underground mine continued to operate until 1971, when a major underground fire forced its closure, affecting approximately 130 miners. Most were transferred into the Linton and Morley mines, a handful transferring to state mines at Huntly, and a dozen or so took early retirement. Open cast production was then stepped up.

From the 1960s on, the increasing use of road transport, the accompanying dieselisation of the railways, the electrification of homes, and the imposition of air quality controls in Christchurch led to reduced demand for Ohai coal. A period of uncertainty in late 1960s and early 70s over the long term fate of the mines lead to a drift of miners away, especially after the closure of Wairakei. Despite new mines being developed, locals report that a sense of insecurity set in, and with a loss in population, various

businesses closed. Many see the fire in the Wairakei Mine as the beginning of the decline of Ohai. Linton was closed in 1979, after having produced over 4 million tonnes of coal over 62 years (Thomson, 1979).

Beaumont mine was developed in 1979 to test and learn about mechanised underground mining techniques, including the use of continuous mining machines, road headers, shuttle cars and conveyor belts, with only 15 miners in two shifts, (all from the newly closed Linton mine) and 12 supervisory and maintenance staff, needed to produce 400 tonnes of coal per day. This closed in 1984. Wairakei mine was reopened in 1981, also as a mechanised underground mine, along with the Wairakei opencast pits. One of these, the Wairakei No 16 open pit mine, worked by earthmoving contractors, produced 2 million tonnes of coal up until its closure in 1986. The stripped over-burden was used to fill in older opencast pits, and at the same time landscape re-contouring and restoration began around previous mine workings. The contractors left the district when opencast mining ceased, taking their workers and houses with them.

With the corporatisation of State Coal into the Coal Corporation (now known as Solid Energy) in 1987, government reviewed the viability of the Ohai mines, and opted to close the Morely Mine in 1988, leaving only the Wairakei Mine operating. During its 33 year life, Morely produced 1.2 million tonnes of coal. According to a local union official, the Ohai mines were not viable at the time, and Government paid the new Coal Corporation \$5.8 million to keep mining in order to prevent local economic collapse. About 260 people were employed in the Ohai district of State Coal in 1986-80 in the Morely Mine, 99 in Wairakei, and about 70 others in professional and administrative positions. The Ohai workers were offered redundancy, and the younger workers chose to leave the district

In 1980, 100 years after mining started, a private open cast mine was opened by the Brazier Mining Company on the site of the old Nightcaps Mine. Braziers, an early local mining family which had moved into transport, had owned the lease for 3 generations. According to Boyle (1980) at the time, there had been frustrations in the district and beyond at not being able to get supplies of state coal from Ohai. This mine has been worked spasmodically since, under different ownership arrangements and names. In addition the old Mossbank No 5 mine at Ohai has also been worked spasmodically since the 1950s as a an opencast mine. In 1991 these private mines, under the name Southern Mining Limited, were acquired by a local earthmoving contractor and coal merchant.

## **Current Situation**

Southern Mining has continued to work as a family enterprise to the present, employing 4 persons full time and producing 10,500 tonnes per annum, split between the two pits. Marnanes, the present owners, market their coal under two brands, "South Coal", and (to the chagrin of Solid Energy) "Ohai Coal" through their own wholesale outlets in the lower part of the South Island. Most of their coal goes to the home heating market. According to the owners, the Nightcaps mine has an estimated remaining life of 15 years, with potential for further underground mining.

Wairakei is the only operating Solid Energy mine at Ohai. It utilises continuous mining machines, shuttle cars, and diesel powered dumpers to win and transport coal from the working faces to a conveyor system to the surface coal screens. In 1995 a new screening and coal bagging plant was constructed, and a robotic bagging machine was installed. Production has been running at around 150,000 tonnes per annum, with about 20 per cent going into domestic use and the balance to industry in the southern part of the South Island, including meat, diary and beverage processing, wool processing, the commercial laundry industry, and various institutions. At the beginning of 1998, Solid

Energy at Ohai had a staff of 68, with 36 working underground. A large proportion of the coal intended for the domestic market is bagged ready for sale.

## **SOCIO ECONOMIC PROFILE OF OHAI**

First settlers of the Ohai area were pastoralists, some of whom established large sheep runs. These included the 22,000 acre Birchwood Station which was subdivided in 1912, the well known Mt Linton Station, and Beaumont Station. Early maps of the Birchwood estate show the name “Ohai” was in use before the town was founded, being the name of what is now the Morley River.

Ohai started as a collection of huts, small houses and a school clustered around the Linton and Wairakei private mines on the Birchwood estate. Further subdivision in 1919 established a formal town site. In its first years, Ohai was relatively isolated, connected initially by very rough roads to Nightcaps and Wairio and from there by rail to Otautau and Invercargill. With the closure of the Nightcaps mines and expansion of the Ohai collieries, Nightcaps and immigrant miners from the north of England and southern Scotland started moving to Ohai in the post World War I period, bringing with them their work practises, love of gardening and sport, and commitment to Methodism and Presbyterianism. The arrival of the Ohai Railways Board line from Wairio brought a rapid expansion of mining and the town began to develop alongside “No. 96 State Highway” and the railway line. The rail also made it possible for miners to commute from Nightcaps. A small flax mill set up operations in the 1920s making use of local coal, but closed after about 10 years.

In the 1920s town development was rapid, with the first shop established in 1921, a rugby club in 1923, the primary school in 1924, a Methodist church in 1927, and a daily horse drawn coach service to Invercargill in 1928. Further local amenities and services were developed, and by the 1950s the town was flourishing with a resident population of just on 900. Development was aided by the Coal Mining Districts Amenities Council which was established by the Labour government in the 1950 Coal Mines Amendment Act. By levying coal production, this body created a fund to be spent on lifting the standard of public services and amenities for miners (Thomson 1979). Ohai received a grant covering about 60 per cent of the cost of reticulating the town for water and sewage, with the rest coming from rates. Over the years various groups received grants to develop sports and cultural amenities. State Coal also built rental houses for staff and miners, and encouraged home ownership by their workers by providing loan finance. In 1979 there were 33 State Coal houses in Ohai, along with other state housing. In 1960, Ohai was made a county town, with its own elected committee, within the Wallace County local authority.

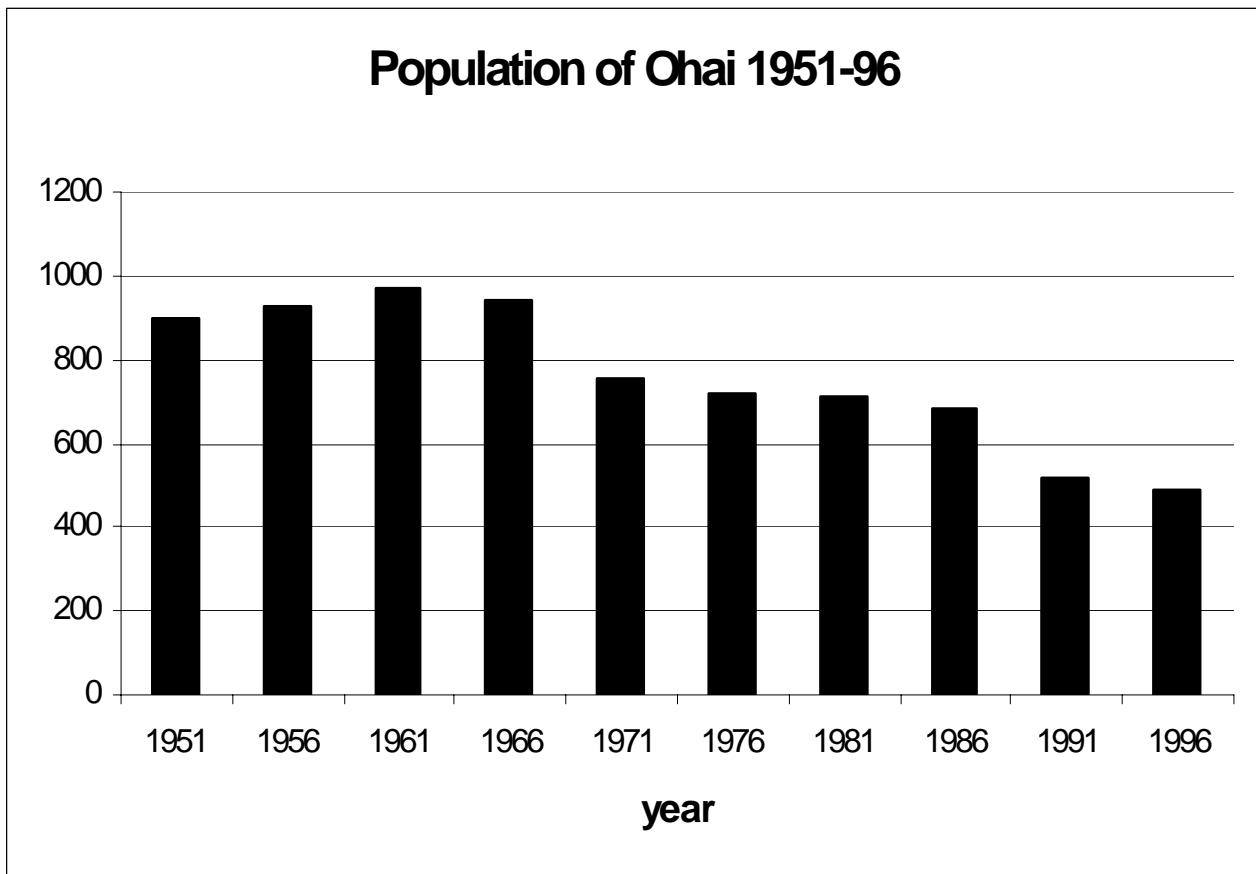
When, in the 1970s, the various collieries were closed and most of the mining population drifted away from the area, shops and businesses in both Nightcaps and Ohai closed in their wake. Clubs and societies began uniting with their neighbouring rivals in their struggle to survive. With corporatisation of State Coal and the attendant downsizing of the workforce in the late 1980s, young people left while older miners stayed on in the town. Government purchased departing miners’ and State Coal rental houses at market rates then sold them off cheaply. Others just took what they could for their houses. This attracted beneficiaries and others wanting to escape rent traps in the cities. However there was no work locally, and few services remained. Shearers who had been coming seasonally to the area also purchased houses. The remaining miners tended to shift out of town to Nightcaps and Winton, where property prices were more stable, and commute to work. By 1998 only a dozen or so Solid Energy workers were living in the town. Consequently, from the late 1980s Ohai became increasingly a town of retired people, shearers and social welfare beneficiaries.

## DEMOGRAPHIC FEATURES

### Population

Like most of the towns in Southland, Ohai's population is falling. Over the past 35 years the population of the town has halved, with dramatic falls in the late 1960s, and late 1980s resulting from mine closures (see figure 1).

Figure 1



Note: Data for the 1951 to 1971 years are for the total population and that from 1976 onwards are for the usually resident population. Changes in population from the 1976 year are calculated using data for the usually resident population as these figures for 1971 and 1976 were published in the 1976 census reports.

The proportion of the town's workforce engaged in the mining industry fell from almost three-fifths to a quarter between 1971 and 1991. By 1996 coal mining employed only one sixth of the workforce. Although many miners and their families left the town, some residents found employment in agriculture and forestry. By 1996 nearly half of Ohai's workforce were employed in the provision of agricultural services, especially shearing, whereas only a tenth had been employed in that industry twenty years before.

### Ethnic Composition

During this period there was also a significant change in the ethnic composition of the town's population. People of European descent, who were 96 per cent of Ohai's population in 1971, represented only half of the population two decades later. The number of Maori residents in the town



has increased, and Maori now make up just under half the population. In comparison, Maori made up nine per cent of the population of Southland District in 1996.

### **Age Structure**

Ohai township has a high proportion of children and elderly compared with other Western Southland communities and the New Zealand population as a whole, with the town progressively losing its working aged population. Thirty eight percent of this group left between 1986 and 1996. Ohai therefore has a much higher proportion of dependants (especially children) to workers compared with other Southland towns. The mean age over the past 10 years has been 27 years, 7 years lower than its neighbour Nightcaps. Over the same period, the median age in other Western Southland towns has steadily increased.

### **Education, Income & Employment**

The proportion of residents of Ohai who hold formal educational qualifications has dropped considerably over the past 10 years, and is considerably lower than for the national population. Furthermore, the distribution of household incomes indicates that the town's residents had lower incomes than the national pattern. Between 1991 and 1996 average personal and household incomes of Ohai's residents dropped, while incomes in neighbouring Western Southland communities rose. In 1986, before state sector and economic restructuring, the average household income was more or less on a par with other towns, but over the next 5 years a considerable gap opened up. Ohai's population is now clearly the poorest in Western Southland. This is due to the high proportion of people not in the labour force (48% in 1996) and a low proportion working fulltime (25% compared with Southland's 55%). The number of people actively engaged in the workforce has more than halved in the past ten years. In the 1996 Census, 11 per cent of the working-aged population was recorded as unemployed, and 40 per cent of those aged over 15 were receiving some form of income support from the state, compared with 3 per cent and 23 per cent respectively for Southland District.

## **INDUSTRY, WORK AND OCCUPATIONS**

### **The role of the state**

Unlike elsewhere in New Zealand, the state played little role in the establishment of the coal mining industry at Nightcaps and Ohai. The private sector developed the mines, established settlements, and built the vital railways links to both Nightcaps and Ohai. Despite approaches, government was not prepared to invest in the rail infrastructure necessary for development of the district's coal fields, and indeed refused to take on the Nightcaps line after mining ceased in the town, despite there being an apparently viable passenger and agricultural freight market.

The Ohai mines and township were established on private land, though the state provided the basic services for the emerging community. Then, as described previously, in the 1940s the state purchased the various mining companies and collieries in the Ohai field in order to increase supply for the war effort. By the end of the decade the state was in control of the local industry, though the Ohai Railways Board continued to operate the rail link, charging for the amount of coal carried. Over time the various older pits were closed, replaced in some cases with larger scale mechanised open cast mining. State Coal also experimented with mechanised underground mining. With other investors, it also investigated the district's potential for commercial production of coal-bed methane, however resources were deemed insufficient for a viable industry. Under corporatisation, the Morely Mine was closed,

the workforce downsized, and the remaining Wairakei Mine mechanised. Many locals believe the next stage in government's involvement will be the sale of Solid Energy, and the closure of the Wairakei Mine. They also point to the high costs of production, and declining markets for Ohai coal due to the proposed banning of domestic coal burning in Christchurch and government's international commitment to reduce New Zealand's domestic and industrial carbon dioxide emissions.

### **The culture of coal mining**

Miners have a very distinctive, male-dominated occupational culture. It "is based on a common workplace, a strong identity with small town lifestyles and a keen sense of history" (Wilkinson and Barker 1986: 11). The work of coal mining is often physical, hazardous, tedious, and dirty. This gives rise to a strong comradeship and vigilance between miners, necessary for survival when working underground in potentially unstable, poisonous and explosive conditions. This sense of mutual dependence extends to the wives and families of the miners, and at Ohai it blended with the often common "geordie" mining heritage and attitude to life and work. At Ohai and Nightcaps mine management, technical expertise, and work organisation practises were imported from the coal fields of Britain. In time, they developed and changed according to local conditions and experience. According to one local interviewee, early miners at Nightcaps also included Catholics driven off their small farms around Wrey's Bush by rabbits, and in time the catholic community focused in the town.

In mining communities, the workplace comradeship tends to spill over into recreational activities outside the mine, and reinforces a sense of community. In localities where it takes several decades to exhaust mineral deposits, mining becomes an intergenerational occupation, and in New Zealand this pattern was often started in the originating country of the miner. In Ohai in the late 1970s there were families which had three or four generations of members who had worked in the local coal mining industry.

Major mine facilities are often owned by large national and multinational corporations. Hence another aspect of the culture of coal mining is the strong allegiance to trade unions. In the past in New Zealand these unions have been big contributors to the development of local services and amenities. Unionism emerged in Nightcaps in the early years of this century with the creation of the Nightcaps District Miners Union. In 1925 it became affiliated with the United Mine Workers of New Zealand and the Federation of Labour, and withdrew from the Arbitration Court system a year later (Thomson, 1979). In August 1932 the Ohai miners struck in a bid for better wages and working conditions. According to Hunt (quoted in Thomson, 1979) at the time of the strike Ohai was "nearly under martial law" in an effort by police to prevent sabotage and to protect strike breakers. The miners stayed out until March 1933 when hardship forced them back to work without winning the changes sought. In the end considerable antipathy was shown by the community to the staunchest union members and miners' leaders, being the last taken back into employment and ostracised socially by others. In the 1960s, in an echo of the action taken by miners at Waihi fifty years before, Ohai's miners collectively boycotted the local hotel because of its inflated beer prices. The union continues today, albeit somewhat constrained by the Employment Contracts Act, and reduced membership.

### **The organisation of work**

In the early phase of coal development both larger scale "industrial" mining and small scale, family owned and based mining existed side by side. The latter was labour- rather than capital-intensive, and characterised by self dependence, flexibility and the multiple skills of the miners. The larger mines tended to have greater specialisation and demarcation in work activities, and bureaucratic structures. The occupational hierarchy put the Mine Manager at the top (in state mines he had a district manager

over him) with administrative support people and technical specialists (such as the mine engineer, planner or surveyor) working to him, then the underviewers who controlled the day to day mine operation and production assisted by mine deputies who were essentially foreman but with direct responsibility for wage workers, safety etc. Next came the miners who worked in small teams cutting the coal, and the various tradesmen, talley-men, truckers, winchmen and outside labourers. Often deputies and underviewers were former miners who had been invalidated in some way and then taken the necessary Mines Department examinations. In this structure, trade union officials played a role in securing safe working conditions and adequate pay.

Young men entering the mines would start at the bottom of the hierarchy as truckers working on the surface, then move underground doing the same work, then, when they turned 20, mining in “solid places” for a minimum number of hours and closely supervised. This underground “apprenticeship” was done in the company of an older experienced miner. Once through the training period, the young miner was able to do the more risky work of extracting the large coal pillars left in place to secure the roof of the mine during development.

Up until the early 1970s, Ohai miners operated on the “darg” or production quota system with 1 darg (or day’s work) being 20 boxes of 12 hundredweight each in winter, and 18 boxes in summer. From the 1940s, the miners worked a 6 hour shift and if they completed their darg early they could knock off work for the day, or keep working and build up time to be taken off later. The close comradeship and sense of mutual care between miners meant that people covered for each other’s production during times of illness etc. Pay was based on production measured in boxes, with each crew having their own tokens which were put on the filled boxes. According to an older miner we interviewed, when the limits on production (ie. the darg system) were removed, different teams ended up receiving different pays. This also varied between the different pits, with the Morely mine being the most difficult in which to get good production. According to our interviewee, this resulted in an informal redistribution of the coal production between teams to even out the earnings.

Nowadays the Wairakei mine is worked in two daily seven hour shifts each with two production teams operating mechanical mining equipment. Although the hours of work are longer, the higher degree of mechanisation has reduced the physical effort required by miners, and increasingly their work mainly involves heavy equipment operation. This means that management and miners alike have become increasingly dependent on the mechanical and electrical tradespersons for maintaining coal production. The tradespersons, rather than the miners, have therefore become the more important group in the modern mine. These changes in status have brought tension between the two groups, aggravated by difficulties of ageing machinery, with the miners blaming the company and tradespersons for poor maintenance caused by low skill levels, and the tradespersons blaming the miners for their poor equipment operating skills and carelessness.

Safety is a big issue for the company and the miners. Training is on going, and the Mines Rescue Station is still in existence. A miner we interview noted that while the work is less heavy and there are fewer strains and sprains, it is no safer, and that accidents, if they happen are more serious. There is also more air circulating in the mine nowadays reducing the gas problem, however this also makes the working environment colder.

### **Technological change in the local industry**

Mining in the past was heavy manual work, with the only mechanical aids being the winches which pulled the full boxes of coal to the surface from staging points underground. Up until the 1940s the main tools of the miner were the pick, banjo shovel, axe, fork, explosives, and hand augurs for drilling

the holes for the explosives, and some form of flame for lighting (originally open candles, and lamps, then the Davey safety lamp and the carbide lamp). Horses were also used for underground haulage.

From the 1940s on, both underground and opencast mining methods and technology began changing in the Ohai mines. On the safety side hard hats, safety boots, electric lighting, and portable personal breathing apparatus were introduced, along with a mines rescue service, improved ventilation, coal dust control, and safer explosives and methods for extracting pillars. Compressed air drills, winch-powered scraper loaders, and conveyors made the job of extracting and recovering the coal easier, followed later by roof bolting, electrically-powered remote-controlled continuous mining machines, and high capacity shuttle cars. High pressure hydraulic mining, such as used now in the Strongman Mine on the West Coast was also tried but is not currently in use at Ohai. In open cast mining, in the past done by hand, the biggest change came with the introduction of mechanical diggers and earthmoving equipment in the 1940s, aided by improvements in drilling and civil engineering. Coal handling has also changed, with computer controlled screening, and automated bagging in operation. Such innovations have enabled production volumes to be maintained while reducing the size of the workforce.

### **Characteristics of the workforce and labour relations**

Since the adoption of continuous mining technologies and the reorganisation of the state mines in 1987 the types of skills required by miners have changed away from physical strength and practical experience to an ability at operating sophisticated and automated equipment. Older miners have had to learn new skills and work practises, there are fewer workers, and new miners are not obliged to work their way through the former ranks of workers. According to the mine manager at Ohai, there have been new people come into the industry, including farmers, and the skills that miners need nowadays are machinery operation and driving, understanding roof conditions, safety, ventilation, and the use of electricity in confined spaces.

Local interviewees have noted that between the 1960s and 1980s, a considerable number of mine management staff of State Coal came and went from the district's collieries as part of their career development. One managers house, according to the local interviewees, had 7 different occupants in 15 years. Each manager brought their own outlook and approach to the mines which tended to be unsettling and lead to disregard by workers for managers who showed little commitment to the district.

At the time of the corporatisation of State Coal, about a quarter of the Ohai workforce was under 25 years of age, and the same proportion was aged 50 or over. However it was the younger miners who tended to take severance in favour of their elders (often relatives) having a job, and they left the Ohai area. Many are reported to have stayed in the mining industry working in Australia and elsewhere. Of the 69 Solid Energy workers in early 1998, 10 were living in Ohai, approximately 46 in Nightcaps, 2 at Tuatapere, 3 at Otautau, and 6 or 7 at Winton. Some of these also have sideline enterprises such as small farms, racehorses etc. The move out of Ohai by permanent workers has been prompted by low property values and sales in the immediate district.

As noted previously, Ohai in the past experienced serious extended industrial conflict, as well as more periodic stoppages in the last 30 years over local and national labour issues. Membership of the miners union used to be compulsory for all workers, while professional and salaried staff belonged to the Public Service Association. In the past, the union had its own medical association funded by a levy on each miner's coal production plus a small deduction from their fortnightly pay. This fund covered miners' and their families' health expenses and welfare. However the fund was bankrupted and ceased to exist in the late 1980s. In the 1990s a new union medical and sickness scheme was started with each member paying in \$10 per fortnight. There are 55 members of this scheme. After trying the New

Zealand labourers and workers union, the local miners affiliated with the Engineers Union, and labour negotiations are now done through its hierarchy. At the beginning of 1998 there were 57 in the local miners union, while management and salaried staff were on individual employment contracts.

Today miners are on a basic pay of \$124 per day, and share in a production bonus scheme. According to the local mine manager who has had a long association with the local coal industry, there is still a tendency to see Solid Energy as State Coal, with a low level of general interest in the circumstances of the company, and lack of trust of management despite better information flow. Only recently, he argued, had the workforce begun to understand the reality of markets and the demands for reliable supply and good quality product at a reasonable price. On the other side, miners say the company is wanting them to make concessions and take pay cuts without specifying which aspects of the operation are incurring the costs while managers and executives collect huge salaries and incur big expenses. They point to considerable uncertainty over the future of Solid Energy and the Wairakei mine and fear the consequences of privatisation for what they claim is a loss-making operation.

## **REGIONAL AND LOCAL ECONOMY**

Rural Southland has experienced major impacts from changes in government economic policy over the past decade that have been reflected in changing patterns of land use. Of the 30,753 sq km making up Southland District, 11,800 is in primary production, of which 95 per cent is taken up by pastoral uses, four per cent in forestry, and the balance in broadacre crops and horticultural production. There has been a shift away from traditional pastoral farming, with an expansion of dairy production in central and eastern districts of the region. Southland's dairy herd increased 34 per cent between 1990 and 1995, while sheep numbers decreased 12 per cent (Southland District Council, 1997).

In the forest industry the opening of more processing plants and the increased planting of exotic forests (often on land formerly used for pastoral farming) has expanded employment (McClintock, 1998). The area in forest in Southland increased 8 per cent between 1990 and 1995 (Southland District Council, 1997). Matura, in Northern Southland, is the centre for manufacture of wood products, with a long standing paper mill, and a new fibre board manufacturing plant.

Tourism, which largely focuses on the Fiordland National Park, and Stewart Island, is also an increasingly important component of Southland's economy, perhaps accounting for 10 per cent of employment in the region (Butcher, 1996). In 1995/96 just under a quarter of a million international visitors went to Southland.

Invercargill city is the regional base for heavy engineering, manufacturing, stock firms, commercial and business services, wholesale and retail trade, government departments, local authorities and tertiary education and training. Bluff is a major sea transport centre, fishing base, and home of the Tiwai aluminium smelter.

Rural industry ownership structures have changed in recent years. Multinational companies and small scale family forestry have replaced the operations of the Forest Service, while a mixture of family and corporate enterprises are also a feature of the recent expansion of the dairy industry in the region (Houghton *et al.*, 1996).

Butcher (1996) anticipates that there will be a short term increase in employment in Southland district, and despite anticipated increases in job numbers in forestry and wood processing, the general downward trend will continue in the long term.

## **The local economy**

Twenty five years ago coal mining was the main industry at Ohai, employing 59 per cent of the local workforce, but according to the 1996 Census this industry was employing only 17 per cent. Just on half of Ohai's workforce is now engaged in agriculture (mostly agricultural servicing) compared with only 11 per cent in 1971.

Agriculture started with the establishment of pasture on the tussock lands of large sheep stations such as Birchwood (established in 1856 and broken up in 1912), Mt Linton, Beaumont (broken up in 1958), and Wilanda Downs. Smaller holdings followed on the remaining land. In time most of the large sheep runs were divided up, enabling family farming to develop. Although Mt Linton station, near Ohai, remains one of the largest sheep runs in New Zealand, carrying 150,000 sheep. Along with the other stations and farms of the district, Mt Linton station provides the basis for the local shearing industry and the district's sole resident wool and skin merchant, based in Ohai.

Most of the local agricultural sector employment is in the shearing industry. In the 1996 Census 54 locals (representing 30% of all employment) were recorded as working in the industry, and 15 (8% overall) were sheep farming. A further nine or so people were described as working in accommodation, in this case the Ohai shearers' hostel and the local hotel. It should be noted that the number recorded in the 1996 Census as working in shearing industry is an underestimate because the Census was taken after the peak of the season.

The development of Ohai as a base for shearing began in the late 1960s when a major shearing contractor purchased the old miners hostel for use as a shearers' quarters and brought his staff to the town. At the peak of his operation he had about 100 employees. There are now three shearing contractors based in Ohai, two in the Nightcaps area, two in Otautau and one in Tuatapere, employing several hundred workers between them, many of whom come from the North Island during the season. Though based in the area, the shearing contractors travel widely for work. Currently the biggest contractor is Western Southland Shearing with 90 staff during the peak January/February period. At the time of our fieldwork, this company had 20 staff engaged at Mt Linton Station alone. This company reported it has difficulty finding local casual workers such as shed hands. In the off season some workers go on the dole or take up jobs in the freezing works elsewhere in Southland.

Increasingly farmers are diversifying into plantation forestry, including eucalypts. Locals report that in the last few years the Malaysian forestry company Earnslaw One has been doing large scale planting on its Gowan Hills property. This has provided work for planting gangs in Western Southland, including people from Ohai. Smaller farms in the Wairio- Birchwood area have also planted woodlots.

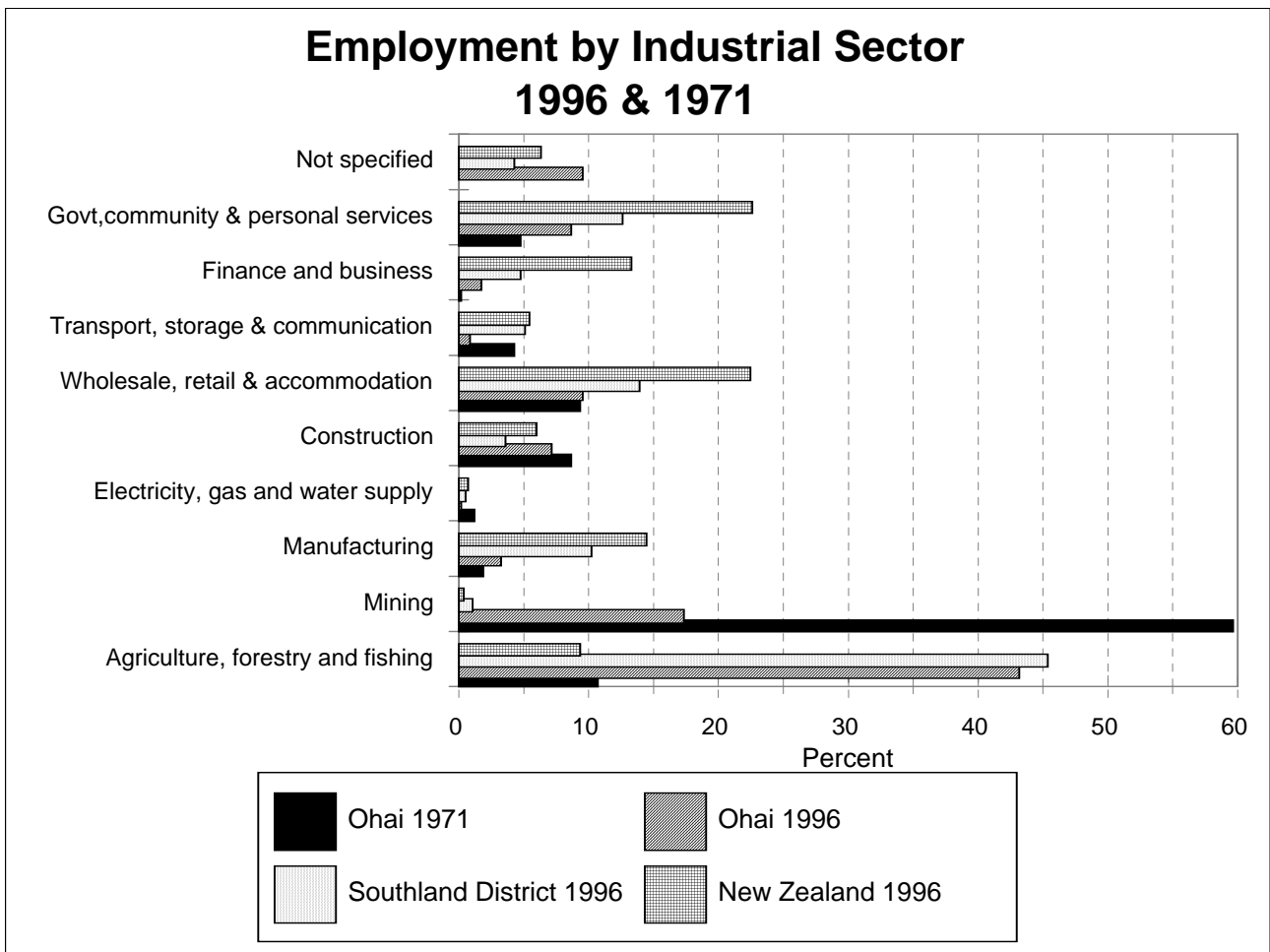
## **Businesses**

Apart from shearing, mining, and sheep farming, there is little business in Ohai to speak of. Most of the town's (and Nightcaps') retail facilities have closed over the past 15 years in response to the reduction in the mining workforce and depopulation. One long term resident reported that in 1971 there were 13 shops in Ohai, and other businesses. Since then closures have included 2 grocery shops, 2 dairies, a butcher shop, a drapery, garage, hairdresser, fish and chip shop, electric shop, trucking company, and a post office. With these closures much of the local work for women disappeared.

Today the main street of Ohai, like the neighbouring communities of Nightcaps and Tuatapere, is flanked by empty shops. Only 3 shops (a convenience store, post agency, and second hand store), a garage, a café situated in the former Methodist church, a hotel (with a bistro), and a wool and skin

merchant can now be found in the town. The café, hotel bistro, and the wool merchant are the only new business investment apparent since the late 1980s. The only other local industry is the Ohai primary school. One or two locals are self employed.

Figure 2



Commercial services are therefore accessed at Nightcaps (limited to a handful of typical small town retail services, and some timber and supply merchants), Winton and Invercargill. Ohai residents travel to Winton for their groceries and regular supplies, and perhaps travel monthly to Invercargill for larger purchases and specialist services.

According to employment and training agencies based in Invercargill, in Ohai and Western Southland in general there are few employment opportunities. The mining workforce is stable and few jobs arise, while farming, forestry and shearing provide mainly casual and seasonal employment. Young people therefore generally leave the district to find work or undertake work-related training. Many of the casual jobs are low paying, and for those on income support with families there is little incentive to take up the jobs when they come available. On the other hand farmers and others report that the unemployed of Ohai are often “unemployable”. Other than in shearing, there also very few opportunities for local women, and increasingly they are prepared to commute to work in Invercargill.

### Unemployment

In the Ohai area, because of the seasonality of work, it is not uncommon for residents to go on and off income support. In addition, the town has attracted jobless and often unskilled people looking for

cheaper living, and with a shortage of work in the district, many are reported to be locked into long term unemployment, and are considered to probably be becoming unemployable. The 1996 Census recorded that 30 out of a total Ohai labour force of 333 were unemployed, (compared with 15 out of 291 for Nightcaps). The number of NZES-registered job seekers in Ohai was not available at the time of our fieldwork.

## **Future Development**

The Ohai-Nightcaps area has had a strong historical reliance on coal mining and farming. After mining in Nightcaps itself ceased, the town continued as a residential settlement for those working in the Ohai mines, and became a minor servicing town for district agriculture. Today its main rural servicing function is in provision of education, transport services, and building. As discussed, Ohai has moved, in several dramatic changes, to being principally a base for the Southland shearing industry, with limited remaining coal mining employment.

In 1996, in an attempt to consider long term economic development options for the district, the Southland District Council, as in other areas, facilitated a “concept planning” process. This brought together representatives from all groups within the community to develop a vision for their future. They saw their key assets as being the beauty of the landscape (Takitimu Mountains), history, abundant natural resources, community, and recreational and life-style opportunities. Potential social and economic development projects identified included:

- enhancement of the appearance of both Nightcaps and Ohai through planting, signage, etc
- “mainstreet” improvement, emphasising history and heritage
- tourism development for both international and domestic independent travellers, based on the mining heritage, sheep runs, and the nearby mountains, and
- development and promotion of unique local events capable of attracting people from elsewhere in Southland.

The planning process also identified opportunities for industry development in forest products, electricity generation, manufacturing, ceramic products, and floriculture.

Seeding money for advancing the Concept Plan was received from the Southland District Council and the Ohai Railway Fund, however there is no promotions association, and progress in implementing the plan is reported to be slow, though some individuals have moved on suggested opportunities, such as the café at Ohai and walking tours. One local farmer reported that there were a lot of people in the district offering farm stays. Generally though, the community plan for development for the area is not making much progress.

## **PHYSICAL AND SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE**

### **Infrastructure and funding**

Prior to the reorganisation of local government in 1990, Ohai was part of Wallace County. Wallace and Southland Counties were amalgamated into the Southland District, and the Council headquarters was moved from Otautau to Invercargill. Ohai now has a Community Development Area Committee which is responsible for the “efficient provision of services which enhance the quality of life of Ohai residents” (Southland District Council, 1998:10). These services include, among others, water supply,



sewerage, stormwater system, waste management, parks and reserves, halls and community facilities, and library service.

Ohai's shares a water supply scheme with Nightcaps and Wairio with water sourced from the Morley River near Ohai. The Department of Health had rated the supply "unsatisfactory" and needs to be upgraded. Approximately 265 Ohai properties are on this supply representing about 50 per cent of all users on the scheme. The Southland District Council has estimated upgrading will cost approximately \$170,000 over the next ten years. Ohai has its own sewerage reticulation and treatment system to which approximately 300 residential and other properties are connected. The treatment plant is in need of repair and upgrading, likely to cost approximately \$300,000 in the next 10 years. This will mean an increase in the sewerage charge on the rates. Waste management consists of weekly kerbside rubbish collection by a contractor and disposal at a local landfill. The landfill has an estimated remaining life of 20-30 years, with resource consents until 2005.

Ohai has approximately 6km of roads, 84 per cent of which are sealed, and 4.8 km of footpaths, and according to the District Council no increase is intended due to the falling population. In addition to rates, locals pay a standard annual charge of \$70 for roading. Almost all parts of the town have street lighting.

There is a public hall in Ohai, built in the 1930s, which is the biggest indoor facility in the town, capable of taking 280 people. This is seldom used, due to falling population and the availability of 7 smaller halls and clubrooms belonging to various community groups. A children's playground is located next door to the town hall. In recent years the community committee has made an effort to beautify the town by providing shrubs to local households to enhance their property frontages, making gardens in the main street, and tidying up the entrances to the town.

Ohai has a small library, since 1995 housed at the school, and supported by a \$500 grant from the District Council and local volunteers. The local cemetery is at Nightcaps. The town has a recreation reserve with tennis and netball courts, a bowling green and clubrooms, a rugby field and pavilion, and an olympic size indoor heated swimming pool built in 1954. This pool is open during summer months only and Solid Energy provides free coal for the boiler. The local Marae committee has been investigating the purchase of the rugby pavilion, made vacant when the Ohai Rugby Club amalgamated with Nightcaps.

The current annual rates income from Ohai residents is approximately \$140,000. Anticipated expenditure and improvements are expected to be paid for out of existing reserve funds and from general district rates, requiring an increase in rates. The Southland District Council has noted that the small and decreasing population of the town is having to pay more to keep its existing utilities and amenities, and in the absence of economic recovery, maintaining existing levels of service in the future "seems impractical" (1998:9).

During fieldwork, many interviewees referred to the infrastructure improvements needed for both Ohai and Nightcaps, but pointed to the increasing inability either community to absorb the costs of such work due to the declining rating base. There have been increasing calls for the Ohai Railways Fund, created by the sale of the assets of the Ohai Railways Board and held in trust by the Southland District Council for the strict use of the Ohai-Nightcaps community, to be used to help pay for the needed infrastructure and public amenities. However the Fund's administrators have been reluctant to allocate such resources without the Ohai and Nightcaps communities first taking the step of rationalising their amenities.

## **Transport**

Ohai and Nightcaps lie on State Highway 96 which runs between Clifden, near Tuatapere, and Winton. In the 1950s when Ohai was thriving, there were four daily buses to Invercargill. This slowly cut back as people acquired private vehicles, and after corporatisation of State Coal and loss of population, there was one daily bus provided by an Invercargill company. This service ceased in 1994, and Brazier Motors, a charter bus company in Nightcaps tried running a weekly service, but with only 6-12 regulars, it had to be abandoned in 1997. Ohai and Nightcaps therefore have no public bus service, though some locals catch the school bus to Winton and connect with a service to Invercargill. However this does not allow much time in town before the return trip. Consequently elderly and those without access to vehicles have difficulties getting to shops and services once available in the district. This is partly solved by car pooling for shopping expeditions to Winton or town. Brazier Motors, which also has a depot in Tuatapere, provides the local school bus service, including two from Ohai to Nightcaps and a secondary school bus to Winton. It also hires buses to local clubs and societies using volunteer trained drivers from within the clubs, and provides a workers' bus for Solid Energy.

In the 1970s, there were four transport companies in the district, including one in Ohai. However today only one remains, Transport Services Ltd. This company, founded in 1974, is on its fourth owner, and currently belongs to the Richardson Group, a big transport operator in Southland. TSL has 19 trucks based in Nightcaps doing general rural haulage and transport work, including fertiliser application and stock movement, though its main business is in carrying coal for Solid Energy. TSL runs four trucks continuously hauling bagged and bulk coal to customers in Southland and to Solid Energy's yard in Invercargill. It also does Solid Energy's earthmoving and stripping where required. The coal industry accounts for about half of the company's business. Prior to TSL's involvement, coal haulage work was done by Franklin Motors in Ohai, which went out of business in about 1986. Long hauling of coal is done by out of town companies and by rail, an average of 1 train per day.

## **Rail**

Rail first arrived in the Ohai-Nightcaps area in the 1870s with the establishment of the Government owned line to Wairio. In the early 1920s runholders, who were also owners of coal mines, and the community put up the money and created a 13 km private line from Wairio to Ohai to enable the development of both agriculture and the coal industry. This line was owned and run by the Ohai Railways Board which levied the mines on the coal tonnage carried on the line. At its peak it had 20 workers (members of the miners union), its own engine, and transported 280,000 tonnes of coal per annum in New Zealand Railways rolling stock. Passenger transport was also provided. In the 1980s, the new Coal Corporation and NZ Rail put pressure on the Board and the line was sold to NZ Rail for \$500,000, and with other sales, the Board ended up with \$1.3 million. This was put into a specially created Ohai Railway Board Trust for the benefit of the community. Today Transrail, the privatised NZ Railways Corporation, operates the Ohai line as part of its network, carrying coal under contract to Solid Energy.

## **Housing**

According to Thomson (1979) and local respondents, the miners and others who settled in Ohai were very house-proud, committed to their properties and keen on gardening, and they were encouraged to purchase their own homes using loans from the Mines Department. Council beautification initiatives further assisted in preventing the town taking on the grimy and dusty appearance that often characterises coal mining towns. The Mines Department also provided rental housing to staff and others, and at the beginning of the 1970s there were 33 such rental properties in Ohai. There was also

a cluster of state rental houses and a block of pensioner flats. Of the departmental houses, one interviewee noted that

*“the managers’ houses were the best in town, then next in quality were the staff houses; the ordinary miner’s homes were small, 2 bedroomed, but well maintained because they had good landlords. These miners paid a peppercorn rental, and when they died the widows were allowed to stay in their houses”.*

When after the 1971 closure of the Wairakei Mine, miners and their families left the town, house prices fell and the only buyers were the shearing contractors and their workers. The closure of the Linton mine, then the winding down of the opencast pits, perpetuated the downturn. By the time of corporatisation and the closure of the Morley mine, the only buyers were the shearers wanting to base themselves permanently in Ohai, and elderly people attracted to the area for low cost freehold ownership (Wilkinson & Barker 1986). There was also an emerging trend of people renting in Ohai or Nightcaps, and investing in properties elsewhere where the prospects of a future sale were better.

The Morely closure brought further departures, and to compensate miners who owned their own homes and could not sell, the government’s Housing Corporation stepped in and bought the properties. State Coal also sold off its surplus rental houses after giving its tenants the option to purchase (using redundancy payments), though the remaining miners’s widows were able to continue renting. With such a large number of houses coming on the market prices plummeted, enabling more shearers to purchase. Others bought houses for removal. By providing low-deposit, low-start home loans, the Housing Corporation encouraged beneficiaries from elsewhere to purchase the cheap houses (including its own state rental properties), thereby disposing of surplus local housing stock. According to long term residents who stayed on, these new arrivals included solo mothers and unemployed people unfamiliar with living in small rural communities, and without the incomes to afford the costs of maintaining their own properties. These new arrivals also faced unanticipated transport expenses and difficulties of living in an area with few retail facilities and services. Furthermore they did not have the benefit of an established family or whanau, (or even agency) support network. For some, living in Ohai became unsustainable and they moved on, only to be replaced by others in similar circumstances.

Some of the houses bought cheaply in the late 1980s were simply abandoned by their owners. Some have been resold and removed, yet others have been allowed to fall derelict, becoming the target for vandalism and juvenile arson, then finally demolition by the District Council. According to the local police officer, *“there have been at least three instances of insurance torch jobs on unsold houses”*. In addition to the derelict, burnt, and demolished houses, around 10 or 12 dwellings have been removed intact, and vacant sections have often been left by their absentee owners to overgrow. As might be expected, the house-proud remaining owners have become increasingly concerned about the neglected appearance of the town. Community members counted approximately 20 abandoned and often poorly maintained sections in the Ohai/Nightcaps area in 1996 some with dilapidated houses.

Census figures indicate that there were 171 private dwellings in Ohai in 1996, that is about 12 (7%) fewer than in 1991. However the biggest drop in the number of dwellings, approximately 36 (or 17% of the stock), occurred between 1986 and 1991. Over the years of the winddown of the local coal industry, home ownership increased, going from 69 per cent of occupants owning their homes in 1971, to 77 per cent in 1996. The proportion of rented dwellings, though, has remained relatively high (27% in 1991 and 23% in 1996) for a town which had experienced such an outflow of mining workers, many of whom rented from State Coal.

## **Health**

Despite the loss of population and services locals say they now have a better health service than in the past. Health services went into crisis in the mid 1980s, but for the last 8 years or so the town has had a medical centre which has visiting healthcare providers, including a doctor on 4 days a week, a practise nurse, a physiotherapist, a plunket nurse and visiting specialists. The centre is operated as part of the Tuatapere Medical Trust. Ohai no longer has its own ambulance service, and the Fire Service has taken on a new role as “co-responder”, with 8 volunteers trained as paramedics. The Mines Rescue Station is still in operation.

## **Education**

As with small towns throughout New Zealand, local schools are important foci for community activities. Early settlers in the district were quick to establish schools, and in the 1930s a high school was opened in Nightcaps. Prior to that students used to have to travel by train to Riverton or Invercargill. In 1970 the Nightcaps Area School became a District High School with a separate primary school, both with rolls of around 120. After the Wairakei mine fire and closure in 1971, all local school rolls fell dramatically, and schools struggled to maintain their staffing levels. The secondary school was particularly badly hit by the departure of miners, and on top of this rural families began sending their children to Central Southland College in Winton.

Wilkinson and Barker (1986) recorded that prior to the Morely mine closure, Ohai Primary School had around 100 children and 5 teachers with 75 per cent of the children coming from mining families, and 17 per cent from the farming community, while Takitimu Area School had 180 children and 16 teachers providing both secondary and primary education. Forty percent of these children were from mining families, but with the closure of the Morely Mine and corporatisation layoffs, over 30 families apparently left the area and the rolls fell again reaching around 40 in the early 1990s.

The paucity of high school students resulted in the “decapitation” of Takitimu School and the loss of six teachers in 1995. Two daily bus loads of local secondary schoolers now travel to Winton to attend Central Southland College. One bus also goes through to Waiiau College in Tuatapere, and others are at boarding school in Invercargill.

In early 1998, Takitimu School had 6 full time and 4 part time teachers, and a teaching assistant serving 124 pupils, two thirds of whom came from outside of Nightcaps township. Twenty three of these children were living in Ohai, and fourteen on farms in the Ohai area. Because of this preference for bypassing Ohai and sending children to Nightcaps, the Takitimu school board and parents collaborated in organising a privately funded school bus to transport the Ohai children to Nightcaps. This means that with a roll of about 60, only about half of the children in the Ohai School catchment actually attend their local school. Some locals believe the lack of support for the Ohai school is an expression of racism and discrimination against the newcomers in the town; others believe that, because Maori children also travel to Nightcaps, it is a reflection of concern for educational standards and expectations. Either way, with further depopulation, it is unlikely that Ohai School can remain viable. In addition to those travelling to Takitimu School, up to twenty children travel to Nightcaps from Ohai to attend St Patrick’s Catholic School. A kohanga reo has operated in the district since the early 1980s, and is presently housed in the old Wairio school.

## **Training**

As described previously, a school of mines operated spasmodically from the 1930s to about 1960, making use of facilities at the former Nightcaps District High school. Today, apart from evening adult classes at Takitimu School, there is no post secondary training available in the district. According to

government agencies in Invercargill, since the Access programmes (run after the winddown of the mines) in the late 1980s, there has been little demand for TOPS and other training programmes in the district, and little interest by training providers in taking the risk of organising courses in Ohai or Nightcaps. Most training is provided through the Southland Polytechnic or private sector organisations in Invercargill. In the past forestry training has been provided by a contractor in Tuatapere. Those accepted onto courses therefore must travel to Invercargill or move for the period of their training if they can afford it.

### **Government agencies and services provided by voluntary organisations**

The New Zealand Police, which has a station and one officer in Ohai, is the only government agency based in the Ohai-Nightcaps area. The New Zealand Employment Service visits the area monthly, but because there are very few job opportunities, these visits are primarily for counselling the registered unemployed, and to assist them with job seeker registration matters and benefit issues. Those wanting to access government services must generally travel to Invercargill. Ohai has a volunteer fire brigade, founded in the 1950s, which falls within the ambit of the NZ Fire Service.

Community welfare and support services to the Ohai and Nightcaps area are provided by community organisations and volunteers from various locations in western Southland. The Takitimu Community Development Committee, which operates out of the old Ohai Plunket rooms is the only group receiving funding from the government's Community Funding Agency (part of the Department of Social Welfare). At present they receive \$12,000 per annum to provide advice and information to the community and this helps pay for a part-time community worker who lives in the area. This position, and the organisation, developed out of the government's social impact management assistance package at the time of state sector corporatisation. In addition to the CFA's contracted services, they run a local food bank. Ohai also has the services of the Patient and Community Trust's mental health support worker for Western Southland. This service began in mid 1997 with funding from Southern Regional Health. Key issues for both workers are the social and material needs of the newer residents who arrived in the area without social and family support.

## **RESOURCE AND ECONOMIC PLANNING, AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

### **Local government**

As discussed above, up until the reorganisation of local government in the late 1980s, Ohai was part of Wallace County, and had its own riding member on the county council. It acquired the status of a "county town" with its own elected committee in the 1960s. The town is now a community development area within Southland District, with its own elected committee, and while Nightcaps has its own equivalent committee. Both face issues of depopulation, lack of local economic development, and the demands of supporting ageing infrastructure and amenities.

### **Resource and economic planning**

At present Solid Energy's operation is being sustained by its industrial customers, though it has been attempting to develop new markets within the region, and to develop an export market for previously unsaleable coal fines. It is also attempting to improve its positioning and image in the domestic fuel market by pre-packing Ohai coal in distinctive orange coloured paper sacks and selling through service stations and other retail outlets in the South Island. However both management and workers say there is little chance of expansion in the local industry in the foreseeable future. According to a local miner,

the Wairakei mine is now being worked back out to shallower coal, and while the production volume is high, the quality is decreasing. Estimates of the remaining life of the mine vary from 6 to 15 years. Some have concerns that the coal resource is being inefficiently exploited in an effort to maintain production levels while keeping cost low. Miners and management reported that there are still significant reserves of sub-bituminous coal in the Ohai field, with potentially 5 million tonnes in the Morely area, of which 1.75 million tonnes could be mined by opencasting. If privatisation proceeds it is believed that the private sector would be unlikely to invest in deep underground mining at Ohai. Some believe that with the downward trend in the market, and the high cost of local mining, the current generation of miners at Ohai will be the last.

Southern Mining report that there is perhaps 15 years worth of production left in their Nightcaps open cut, with potential for future underground mining if there were a market.

## COMMUNITY

### Industry as citizen

The relationship between the coal mining industry and the communities of Ohai and Nightcaps has been one of direct dependence. Both communities grew up around the mines, and in the case of Nightcaps, the mining company established the townsite and provided the land for the establishment of community amenities. Both management and the Miners Union played an active role in community affairs. Local amenities and infrastructure in Ohai were developed with the assistance of the union's amenities fund, and grants from the Mines Department, which also provided cheap rental housing to workers. State Coal provided Ohai with a heated swimming pool, which Solid Energy continues to supply with free coal, and the local rugby ground. Other informal assistance included allowing equipment and vehicles to be used for community activities, and the provision of a free annual allowance of up to 15 tonnes of coal to each worker, which continued after retirement. Much of this coal went to relatives and friends and entered the informal local barter system. Solid Energy has continued the coal allowance, including for those who have retired and to miners widows. Up until recently when new occupational health and safety regulations were implemented, some old miners and other locals also used the bathhouse at the mine.

### Cultural values

Apart from their mining skills and mining culture, the working class Geordie miners who settled Ohai brought with them a love of nick names, gardening, and of sport. Interviewees who have observed the community and local way of life for many years report that Western Southland has a "*dour Scottish culture*" with local peoples' values centring on "*the Presbyterian ethic of hard work, hard play and family*". In the past miners often "*chose to live in relatively humble surroundings despite having good incomes, were inward looking, and tended to marry within the community*". Today they still have "*strong intergenerational connections and love of family, and elderly parents often lived with their children*". Being predominantly of working class stock "*people still tend to be suspicious of authority, innovation, and intellectualism*" and when combined with labour movement socialism, of management. At the same time the long involvement with a single industry and the state as the employer meant that until 10 years ago, there was no unemployment, and for most, advanced education was not necessary.

Traditionally those granted the greatest respect in the community and looked to for leadership were the mine managers, the heads of the RSA, provincial and national sports representatives, clergy, doctors, school principals, directors of the Ohai Railways Board, and leaders of notable pioneer families.

Ordinary working men acquired socially-levelling nick names reflecting aspects of their character, ability or appearance, and these stuck with their owners for life, often substituting locally for their real names. Nick names are still common among the longer term residents of the district.

During fieldwork, one interviewee noted that in the past Ohai “*was a wild town with tough miners and tough drinking*”, and the rivalry between the men of Ohai and Nightcaps on the football field and outside the pub was legendary. Traditionally people were “*joiners*” and, as can be seen in Thomson’s and Boyle’s histories of the area, there have been many organisations serving a wide variety of interests. The fierce independence of the people of both Ohai and Nightcaps meant that there was considerable duplication of sports and other clubs and amenities, which have been difficult to sustain.

Dramatic changes in the local coal industry, and the arrival of Maori have especially jolted the Ohai community. The new arrivals are said to have different attitudes to family, work, and property, and are “*not willing to participate in the community*”. On the other hand, there is an emerging “*alternative*” society, made of people of different backgrounds and tribal affiliations who are attempting to create a sense of community and identity through the establishment of a local marae. These new arrivals generally have no connection with coal mining, its demands and its culture - rather their connections are with shearing and its particular rhythms, and they make up the young of the town. Some are socially marginal and poor, being welfare dependants, associated with gangs, users and cultivators of drugs, and lacking social and parenting skills.

## **Sports**

As noted, sport is a key social feature of the local communities, and the rugby clashes between Nightcaps and Ohai were known throughout Southland. Other sports which have had followings in Ohai include cricket, wrestling, shooting, golf, bowls, hockey, netball, tennis, athletics, and whippet racing (an imported Geordie interest). Both the rugby and golf clubs established local facilities to rival those in Nightcaps. With the falling availability of players and the loss of administrative expertise due to mine closures, some clubs, including rugby, were forced to unite with Nightcaps. Others faded out or exist in name only. However Ohai, despite only having less than a dozen or so regular and ageing players, continues to retain its bowling and golf clubs (under one administration) and its tradition of holding club day on Sunday to fit in with mining.

## **Class and conflict**

Many of those who migrated to the mines of Southland from the United Kingdom did so to escape the class system. This meant there was a strong egalitarian ethos with most residents sharing a similar social status. Status and reputation in single industry towns is often derived from the workplace. In the case of Ohai when the mines were much larger employers than now, mine managers and professionals were well regarded in the community. They were regularly and well paid and occupied the best houses in the town which were supplied by their employers. Along side them were a handful of professional people, business leaders, and heads of key local societies, clubs, lodges, and families. According to local mining informants, “*the marked social division between workers and salaried staff often found at Huntly and other coal mining communities was not as evident at Ohai, and the groups socialised together*”.

On the other hand several locals reported that in the Ohai district there has been a traditional tension between the farmers and miners. The farmers, often large run holders, were self-employed, supported conservative politics, and tended to regard themselves as the pioneer landed gentry. To the miners they were “*wealthy and privileged*”. The miners were state-employed workers doing dangerous hard jobs,

and were Labour Party supporters. The farmers often saw the miners as cosseted by the tax payer, “*too powerful, and apathetic in community affairs*”. This tension has over the years manifested itself in the membership and administration of clubs and societies, local body affairs, the football field, and social distance.

With the marked change in the Ohai population over the past 10 years, a clear division between the older ex-mining residents and the newcomers has become evident. Some locals interpret this as “racial”, though one Maori interviewee believes that “*racial tolerance has actually improved over the past 20 years*”, and that the social divisions are based on differences of life-style and circumstances. Even though mining and shearing have traditionally been working class occupations, each group is said to have its own work ethics and patterns of life. For example, shearers travel a lot away from their families and homes, and it is difficult for them to make a regular commitment to community activities. However other new comers include solo parent families, unemployed, and socially marginal people who are seen by the established mining and farming-based community as bringing “*many problems and contributing little*”.

### **Community organisation and leadership**

In their former days, the Ohai and Nightcaps communities had bigger populations and a strong base of community leadership and participation. The long term association with the mining industry endowed both towns with amenities supporting a wide range of community activities, and people committed to them. In Ohai this included Methodist/ Presbyterian Union, Catholic and Anglican churches and clergy (with their various parish activities being an important part of local women’s lives), the Druid, Masonic and Buffalo Lodges, each with their own facilities, and an RSA. For many working men though, drinking at the pub at end of the working week was an important part of local social life.

The winddown of mining and the loss of jobs meant many of the active community leaders and followers left the area. Two of the lodges, and two of the churches have closed and their members have united with Nightcaps or other centres. The Buffalo Lodge and the Anglican parish are said to exist in name only. The Methodist Church building was sold and now houses a new café, and in early 1998, the Catholic church was for sale. The pub is still an important aspect of local social life, especially for the newer residents. Women tend to be the leaders among the Maori residents and are working towards establishing a community marae using either the empty rugby club pavilion or catholic church.

As mentioned previously, the assets from the winding up of the of the Ohai Railways Board in 1990 were put in a community trust fund. This fund, worth \$1.3 million when established, is held by the Southland District Council and administered by a local committee. The interest earned on the principal (approximately \$100,000 per annum) serves as a grant fund for the Ohai-Nightcaps community. It is targeted at tertiary education scholarships, support for sports and other organisations, community and economic development initiatives and events, and the development of community facilities. With the declining population and falling participation in clubs and societies, the fund is under increasing demand to sustain facilities and activities which, because of the historical rivalry and independence of Ohai and Nightcaps, are often duplicated. However the fund’s administrators are reluctant to use the available money on “*maintaining the current oversupply and inefficient use of facilities*”.

### **Social problems**

In the past, the main problems in Ohai related to alcohol abuse and brawling. However families were stable, and there was universal employment, at least for men. There was little paid employment for



women though, and their lives generally focused around home, family and church, with worldly matters, such as driving the car and doing business, left in the hands of men. Where hardship was experienced for some reason, the union, extended family and the community provided support.

With the restructuring of the state and the winddown of coal mining during the 1980s, Ohai, like other towns experienced negative impacts. The personal and economic uncertainty, and ultimately redundancy, broke up families and community networks. Younger workers and *“the smartest”* took severance pay and left the area and the country. Others found that because of age, they had few prospects for future employment and were stuck with a rapidly devaluing houses in a community losing its services, yet they opted to stay. Many took advantage of the property settlement offered by government and left to make lives elsewhere. Those with shops but with few customers suffered major losses. These changes created significant stress in the community at the time.

Local community and social workers report that with the arrival of newcomers has come *“welfare dependency, increases in alcohol and drug abuse, petty theft, family dysfunction, child health and behaviour problems, truancy”*, and few of the personal and family skills and means to deal with the problems. Youth are reported to be experiencing particular difficulties with problems of *“isolation, lack of self esteem and achievement, and increasing drug abuse”*. Attempts were made to run a youth programme, but behavioural problems and lack of parental involvement caused it to be abandoned. Coming from diverse backgrounds and from the North Island, the new arrivals lack family and community support networks. Lack of public transport has exacerbated problems of isolation. As outlined previously some support services have developed, but they are under-resourced. At the same time the established population is ageing, creating increasing demands on health and care services. In our interviews, a social worker noted that *“Western Southland is the poorest part of Southland, and Ohai-Nightcaps is the poorest part of Western Southland”*.

The sustained downturn in farming has meant farmers are working longer hours and harder, and they have pulled back from participation in community organisations and activities. This has added to the shortage of volunteers and to community group failure, which in turn has reduced community cohesion and identity.

## **Maori**

In 1968, according to a long standing resident, there were five Maori families in Ohai four were working in shearing, and one in the coal mines. Since then the Maori population of Ohai has grown steadily with shearers recruited from the North Island by Southland contractors. Initially most were transient, but as the coal mining industry began to contract, cheap houses and the miners’ hostel became available for longer term accommodation. The permanent Maori population grew. In the late 1980s and early 1990s there was a marked influx of Maori, reaching just under 50 per cent of the normally resident population of around 500 in 1996.

The Maori residents of Ohai are reported to be divided into factions according to their various tribal affiliations, maintaining links to their tribal groups in Invercargill and beyond. At the same time, according to various informants, many of the Maori people in the area have lost their roots and the children are not being taught Maori values. One interviewee noted it is *“like in an urban situation but in a rural area - they don’t know their culture, their mountain, river etc.”*. The Te Orua Nui Marae Committee have been working towards establishing a marae as a cultural focus for the community. Their proposals in the early 1980s encountered considerable opposition from the wider community, however, over the intervening years this has reduced considerably and the Committee has increasing support from agencies and the community for their latest proposal to purchase the former Ohai rugby

clubs rooms and to convert them to a community marae. Financial support for this venture is being sought from the tangata whenua through the kaumatua who lives in Invercargill. Locally, women are the active leaders.

### **Women, young people and the elderly**

Mining has traditionally been a male-dominated industry with only administrative and secretarial employment being available for women. Moreover, there was little need for married women to work as miners were well-paid. In the Ohai district, job opportunities for women have always been largely limited to “pink collar” work, and professions such as teaching and nursing. Currently women are centrally involved in shearing as shed hands and wool handlers, etc. Some women commute from the district, including from farms, to jobs in Winton, Otautau, and Invercargill.

As noted previously women of the district traditionally focused on the “reproductive” work of family and home maintenance, though took active roles in church groups and activities and women’s groups such as the Country Woman’s Institute, Plunket Society, Playcentre, and school parent’s group. Since the 1980s women have been taking an increasing responsibility for the administration and leadership of clubs and societies, voluntary social work, and for household income generation. Newcomers are less involved, and many have young families.

However the established community is ageing, and few people are available for community service. The elderly are catered for by a local senior citizens group activities, and pensioner housing. Bowls and golf are dominated by older residents. Without local public transport some experience difficulty in getting to shops and services now only available in Winton, Otautau or Invercargill. The local medical centre is said to cater well for elderly resident’s needs.

### **SUMMARY & CONCLUSION**

Ohai has experienced major ups and downs in its coal mining industry. Beginning at Nightcaps about 1880, the industry developed rapidly and continued there until the 1920s when the resource became depleted. The closure of the Nightcaps mine coincided with the establishment of a rail link to Ohai and the establishment of several private collieries. The new town grew up as a settlement for miners and their families. In the 1940s these mines and coal resources were acquired by the state and developed further. Production was expanded and new methods and technologies were introduced, and the most easily accessible coal was worked out. Through the 1960s and 70s the domestic market for coal, on which the Ohai mines depended, shrank dramatically and mine closures followed. By the mid 1990s there was one capital (rather than labour) intensive underground colliery working, reliant on domestic industrial customers.

The fortunes of Ohai (and Nightcaps) have closely followed those of coal mining. The declining workforce has meant significant depopulation, and today the town is having difficulty sustaining itself and coping with problems associated with social change. Its continued existence now centres more on the resident shearing workforce, beneficiaries, and retired mining families, rather than those actively engaged in mining. Mining continues, but the future of the remaining Ohai mine, and the community itself, is uncertain.

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