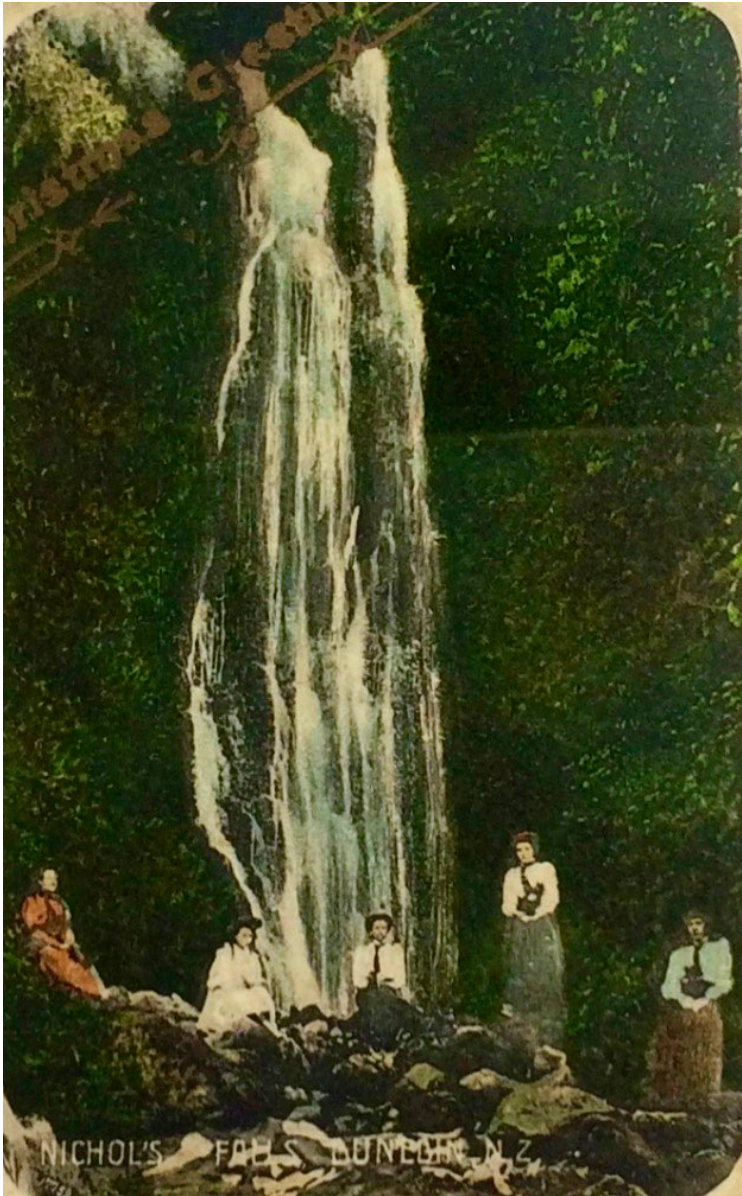


Chapter Three

Nicol's Falls



In the 1890s the lower waterfall in Nicol's Creek, Leith Valley, was a major tourist attraction. Letters addressed to locals at the 'waterfall,' New Zealand, eventually got there. A few daring women visiting the falls changed into men's trousers once away from public view but photos always showed them in long Victorian garb. During the Second World War access was blocked off to prevent the water catchment 'being poisoned by the Japs.' The barbwire and keep-out signs remained after the war and Dunedin forgot about the waterfalls.

A hand coloured postcard given to me by an elderly friend Olive Cartwright in 1966. Shows what she was expected to wear to visit Nicol's Falls when young.

Bill Davidson, a local historian, would not allow his Leith Valley early settlers history to be published before his death. "Too

many sensitive social issues." In the early 1960s an elderly Bill encouraged us Mason school boys to report back on Nicol's Creek's historic sites. Bruce and I cycled from St Clair and based ourselves from Jock Tyson's at the top of Malvern Street. This was Bill's former home. Jock became a conservation and bush-knowledge mentor for me.

Bruce and I had many adventures exploring Nicol's Creek and its five waterfalls. We even contemplated building a hut in the upper basin. We had nervous moments when wild cattle smashed through derelict fences as they shadowed us in the bush.

At a later date I gave the Dunedin City Council Water Department advice on dealing with ongoing illegal cattle grazing based on my experiences in the Catlins. After two weeks of public notification the most successful offender was given the right to muster and sell the wandering animals. The end result was a punch-up with other offenders at the sale yards.

The sheer walls at the water intake have a spectacular glow worm display. This, and the main waterfall twenty minutes upstream, were too good to be excluded from the public without good reason.

I started taking Forest and Bird groups to see the glowworms. It was interesting getting mainly older people under the barbwire fortifications by torch light. Further trips followed without being hassled by officials. A Water Department friend quietly put in a stile beside the no-entry signage at the locked gate. The word was getting out. Soon I was escorting overseas researchers studying recreational usage of water catchments. Photos of the 'KEEP OUT' signs, beside an inviting stile, began to appear in publications.



Welcoming stile and 'KEEP OUT' sign. Mum checking it out. *BJM*

In the 1990s I led many Kiwi Conservation Club night trips as far as Nicol's Falls. Mud, water, torches, cave wetas, glowworms, morepork and winter frosts. A great fun adventure for kids and their parents. One night, with the help of entomologist Antony Harris, we juggled 140 people in shifts up and down the valley. "No wonder

half the lights are out in Dunedin,” quipped one parent. On another occasion I was staggering and lurching in the stream bed leaning backwards with a torch to spot night beasties high on the gorge walls. A small worried voice asked, “Is that man alright Mum?” “He's OK dear,” whispered Mum as she discretely moved the boy away.

Today the public are encouraged to visit. Interpretive panels and signage are in place en-route to the popular water intake and glow-worm display. The upper basin is crossed by tramping tracks and mountain bike tracks descend the north side.

And today: there are tracks everywhere, while still protecting the water supply

