

New Zealand Society of Genealogists



THE TANGIWAI DISASTER

New Zealand Society of Genealogists Inc.

FAMILY HISTORY - PRESERVING OUR PAST FOR THE FUTURE



Tangiwai – ‘weeping waters’ in Māori



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Background



- New Zealand's most tragic rail disaster
- Tangiwai, 10 km west of Waiōuru in the central North Island
- Christmas Eve 1953
- 285 passengers and crew
- 151 people died mostly from drowning



What happened?



- Water from Mt Ruapehu's crater lake breached an ash barrier
- Thousands of tons of water came down the mountain
- A 6-metre-high wave containing water, ice, mud and rocks surged, tsunami-like, down the Whangaehu River



What happened (cont)



- Sometime between 10.10 and 10.15 p.m. this 'tsunami' struck the concrete pylons of the Tangiwai railway bridge
- At 10.21 the Auckland -Wellington express Ka 949 reached the bridge which buckled beneath its weight
- The engine plunged into the river, taking all five second-class carriages with it



Wrong place – wrong time!



- At 10.20pm the river was at its peak 6 metres above normal
- One hour later the water level had dropped several metres
- Two hours later the water level was only a metre above normal



The Bridge



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Carriage



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Memorials and burials



- Last days of 1953 – Burials in Karori, Wellington
- March 1957 – National Memorial Karori Lawn cemetery
- June 1989 – Memorial at Tangiwai to mark the site



1953 - Karori



- 21 coffins of unknown victims placed side by side in an 18 metre long grave



1957 Karori Lawn Cemetery



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1989 Tangiwai Memorial



- Memorial to mark the site of the tragic loss of 151 lives



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