

St. Helena

Relic of the convict days, this picturesque island in Moreton Bay, Queensland, is now becoming a holiday resort

By FRANK SNOW

ITS mangrove-fringed shores caressed by the blue waters of the Pacific, St. Helena Island is one of the most picturesque of the magnificent island group that has made Moreton Bay a holiday paradise. But it was only within the past few months that St. Helena became a holiday resort. For 69 years it was the "No Man's Land" of the glorious Bay—the location of a penal prison, the history of which carries many black chapters of the convict days. Within the deserted walls of the old prison there remain many grim relics of the time when some of Queensland's most desperate criminals were held captive to pay the drastic price for their sins against society.

Before being brought into use as a prison island in 1864, St. Helena, which got its name when it became the refuge of a troublesome blackfellow from Dunwich (Stradbroke Island), then a branch penal settlement, was for a short period utilized as a quarantine station. From 1874 onward for two decades, St. Helena was regarded as the principal prison for the State of Queensland. Many of the State's most desperate criminals ended their lives within the sturdy stone cells which now echo with the laughter and shouts of joyous island trippers. Buried in the prison cemetery not far from the gaol buildings, the bones of these sinners against society rest beneath crudely-carved tombstones, which are identified one from another only by numbers.

IN Brisbane there are one or two veteran ex-warders still living who can tell many stirring tales of their experiences during the



ST. HELENA CEMETERY, WHERE EACH STONE CROSS BEARS BUT A NUMBER.



IN 1867 THIS 24-POUNDER CANNON WAS INSTALLED TO FACILITATE SIGNALLING IN FOGGY WEATHER.

early history of the island gaol. Their accounts of the rigid hand of the early penal code only go to show how civilization has revolutionized the methods of prison reform during the last fifty years.

Back in the early sixties, for instance, when a prisoner had completed his sentence (which he was compelled to do to the last day), he left the prison penniless and friendless. At that time there was no such thing as remissions for good behaviour. The lash was then regarded as the most effective means of enforcing discipline.

Before the establishment of the gaol there, the island was under the control of the Sheriff, as was the hulk *Proserpine* (anchored near the mouth of the Brisbane River about three miles away), upon which convicts were housed and taken over each day to work on the island. With the occupation of the first gaol buildings, the prison staff consisted of one superintendent, two turnkeys, and a military guard of one N.C.O. and twelve soldiers. The first superintendent was a Mr. McDonald, and the first officer in command of the guard, Captain T. M. Eden, 50th Regiment.

In 1868 there was accommodation for 140 prisoners. At that time the only means of communicating with the mainland was by flag signals to the hulk *Proserpine* and thence to the Customs station at Lytton. To facilitate S O S signals, a 24-pounder cannon was installed. The old firing-piece is still there—the object of many curious sight-seers.

AS early as 1869, St. Helena had its own blacksmith and carpenters' shops, and, following the clearing of the island and cultivation of sugar-cane fields, a sugar-mill—the first in Queensland—was erected and operated by the prisoners.

It was found, however, that the cane-fields provided ideal concealment for would-be escapers—of whom some of the more adventurous provided many thrilling incidents—and subsequently the practice of cane-growing was discontinued.

In 1873 it was possible to house upwards of 300 prisoners at St. Helena. In that year the police guard was supplanted by a prison staff comprising one superintendent, one chief warder, and twenty-two warders.

In 1892 the prison commenced a dairy-farm, which in later

years was a big contributor to the general improvement of dairy herds in Queensland. The nucleus of the prison herd, consisting of one bull and fifteen cows (Ayrshires), was imported at a cost of £439. The herd was many times successfully represented in the Ayrshire classes at the Brisbane Royal Show.

In 1933, the Queensland Government decided to close up the

gaol and hand St. Helena over to the Brisbane City Council. For a time the Brisbane city fathers were at a loss to know what to do with the place; but private enterprise relieved them of their problem, and a few months ago a Brisbane concern was given a long-term lease of the island. It has since launched out to develop the place as a holiday and sight-seeing resort.

Raffles in Feathers

By G. BEDDING



(Photo, "New Zealand Free Lance.")

MANY will tell you that the weka, or New Zealand woodhen, is rapidly becoming extinct; but the tramp who ventures far into the ranges will contradict this statement.

In size the weka is about the equal of the domestic fowl—longer in the body, but not quite so deep. His colour, a dark greyish-brown, harmonizes so well with the rocks, roots, and mould of his natural habitat that he is difficult to detect.

His diet is varied. In fact, he will eat anything from decayed vegetable matter to raw meat. The most favoured dish he obtains by plundering the nests of other birds. Eggs and chicks alike are grist to his mill.

Like most nocturnal prowlers, if seen in the daytime he appears to have a guilty conscience, slinking about like a murderer—and well he might, for murderer he certainly is. But, when night comes, he sheds this mantle and becomes the terror of his kind. His pugnacity will never allow him to miss a fight, no matter how trivial the pretext.

Centuries of living in a land free from beasts of prey, and with abundant food to be had on the ground, have robbed him of the power of flight. For their natural function, his wings are

useless, but—and it is a big "but"—they are not mere reminders of laziness, for, at the tips, the quills are hardened, providing ugly weapons, weapons more for offence than for defence, and the weka is a past-master in using them.

THE following incident, typical of this bird, occurred during a deer-stalking trip in the Tararua Ranges.

We had pitched our light tent and were just settling down for a well-deserved sleep when we were rudely disturbed by a frightful clatter, punctuated by the dissonant squawkings of angry birds. Investigation showed two wekas struggling for possession of our frying-pan.

The weka, thief by nature, will lift anything light enough for him to carry. Boots, socks, and other indispensable articles are apt to take unto themselves wings, and vanish if left within reach. He has an irresistible passion for bright things, and the unwitting camper who leaves his eating implements lying about usually eats his breakfast with his fingers.

The shiny pan had attracted the kleptomaniac, and he was making off with it. A second weka, governed by similar predatory instinct, had also cast his eye upon it; and, with the ferocity which makes him feared by all others in the bush, the quick-tempered bird had attempted to wrest it from thief number one.

The clatter of the pan and the discord of the fighting birds had wakened us. In the dim half-light cast by the dully-glowing embers of our dying fire, we watched, with great interest, the battle royal that ensued.

In and out they darted, slashing at each other with their sharp beaks, for all the world like a pair of fencers watching their opportunity to dart in for a telling thrust.

Suddenly one saw his chance. Quick as a flash he darted in. His beak slashed and stabbed. His wings beat mercilessly upon the other's head and neck, tearing out great tufts of feathers and flesh. Then his cries changed subtly, the angry notes gradually giving way to those of triumph. When at last he rose, there was not the slightest sign of life in the sorry-looking bundle of feathers that lay, an inert, indistinguishable lump, just where it had fallen.

Without doubt the victor would have devoured his victim had he been undisturbed, but an ill-timed movement drew his attention to us. He gave us a challenging look, uttered a defiant cry, turned, and disappeared into the darkness.