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Kiwi Kurigers: Celebrating 100 years living in New Zealand



Kurigers | On February 17, 1920 Rosalina Kalin and Johann Kuriger were married in Einsiedeln, Switzerland.



Kurigers | Rosa's family home (c1930). Her sister Agatha is in the left window.



Kurigers | Rosa and Johann with 7 of their children by the water tank at their home in 1933.

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Kiwi Kurigers celebrate 100 years in NZ

On February 17, 1920 Johann Kuriger and Rosalina Kalin exchanged marriage vows in the Benedictine Abbey of Einsiedeln, canton Schwyz, Switzerland. More than 18,000 kilometres away from the home they made here in Oaonui, New Zealand.

2020 marks 100 years since their wedding vows in Einsiedeln, so we celebrated Johann and Rosalina. On February 29, the first and second generations gathered for a 100-year remembrance and anniversary celebration dinner. Continuing on the next day, there was a huge gathering of five generations of descendants with a mass, headstone blessing and family picnic at Opunake, Taranaki.

It was a fantastic occasion and lovely to share so many stories and memories with the next generations, of which there are 141 great grandchildren, 136 great, great grandchildren and five great, great, great grandchildren – that's 335 direct descendants!

This is their story...

Johann was born on November 5, 1880 in Egg, Einsiedeln. He was the sixth of 10 children of Konrad Anton Kuriger and Meinrada Josefa Steinauer. The family farmed near Egg. The Kuriger (now with a K) name is strongly represented in the area.

Before emigrating, Johann served in the Swiss Army from 1899-1903. He left Switzerland in November that same year, aged 23, via Italy and boarded a boat, arriving in New Zealand seven weeks later. He travelled to Inglewood where he worked for a stint, before moving to Kaponga, where many Swiss had settled, and started farming.

Rosalina was born on September 19, 1895 in Bennau, Einsiedeln, the fifth of six children of Joseph Meinrad Kalin & Viktoria Oechslin.

The family home in Bennau for many years was the home of Rosa's niece Hedwig (Hedy). Today the home is lived in by Rosa's great niece Martha and Markus Betschart and her family.

During the 15 years from 1904 to 1919, Johann and Rosa had vastly different lives.

In 1908 Johann was naturalised a New Zealander and in 1912, Johann purchased land on Upper Oeo Road in partnership with Josef Amrien and supplied the Mangatoki Dairy Company. They farmed the land until 1918, when they decided to sell up. Johann then purchased 142 acres (59 ha) in Oaonui, adjacent to the Mototi Stream.

Johann returned to Switzerland in 1919, leaving his farm to be managed by Mr and

Mrs Martin Steiner. He took with him a greenstone pendant, gifted to him by local Maori for the new bride he headed home in search of. During his time in New Zealand Johann had formed close relationships with pioneering families, alongside the Swiss, as well as a solid connection with the Maori community where he learnt to speak the native language fluently.

Having completed her schooling, Rosalina then worked as a waitress. But with the outbreak of World War I, Switzerland closed its borders and could not trade exports easily or safely. Rosalina's family struggled during war times to put food on the table and keep warm at night. Times were not easy. Little did she know that would all change when she met her future husband. A later quote of Rosa's was, "The best thing about coming to New Zealand is that we were never cold or hungry".

Johann arrived back in Einsiedeln, quite different to when he'd left 15 years earlier. While back in his home country, he met a young lady by the name of Rosalina. A courtship began and the chance of a better life, which was the dream of many during these post war times, was encouraging for the family.

Johann and Rosalina were married on February 17, 1920 in the Benedictine Abbey Church in Einsiedeln, and Rosa wore the greenstone pendant over her wedding gown. Four months later, the newlyweds left Switzerland and never returned to visit their homeland again.

Three others left Einsiedeln on June 20, 1920 along with Johann and Rosalina. Meinrad Kalin (Rosa's younger brother), Arthur Kuriger (Johann's nephew) and Alfons Kalin. They trained across the beautiful mountainous country, stopping to pick up others on the way; Mr and Mrs Frank Nolly, Mr Jacob Van Holzen, Miss Annie Blatter, Mr and Mrs Len Chamberlain, Miss Josie Zimmerman (later Mrs Joe Kaiser), Mr Joe Kaiser, Mr and Mrs Fidel Zimmerman, Joe Zimmerman and Loui Zimmerman.

Now a group of 17 Swiss folk, they continued by train across the Swiss-French boarder to Paris. From Le Havre, a large international shipping port, they board the ship 'Tunisian.' By then it was June 23 and the group already feel a long way from their homes. On July 6 they arrived in the port of Quebec, Canada. From there they boarded



Kurigers | Rosa with their 8 children in 1945 (Johann passed away in 1942).

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a train to Montreal, then across Canada to Vancouver. They had a few days exploring the city before boarding the 'Niagara' to sail onto New Zealand.

On July 21 they embarked the 'Niagara' to the sound of trumpets! A week later, they made a short stop in Honolulu, and again in Fiji on August 5. The 'Niagara' finally arrived in Wellington on August 9, 1920.

From here, Johann and Rosa travel by train to Eltham, then by coach to Charlie Schuler's in Kaponga. Johann had been away for almost 10 months. Whilst staying with the Schuler's, Rosa learnt some English before travelling with Johann by horse and cart to the farm in Oaonui.

It was not long after settling in at Oaonui and the children started to arrive. Over the next 16 years they welcomed eight healthy children: Mary 19.11.1920, John 08.12.1921, Conrad 13.12.1922, Joseph 24.02.1924, Louis 29.06.1926, Leonard 29.08.1929, Alexander 29.04.1933 and Anna 21.04.1937. The first three children were born at home while the following five were born at Opunake Cottage Maternity Home. When the children were young the family felt blessed as they suffered little ill health but knew in an emergency the neighbours over the road had a telephone.

Johann loved horses and was skilled at breaking them in, whether for himself or others. The horses helped plough his and other properties in the area. Harvesting was also a mammoth task, and in the early days



Kurigers | The Kuriger family cut the cake at their 1990 reunion.
From left: Joe, Con, John, Mary, Anna, Lou, Len and Alex.

was turned with a pitchfork, so everyone in the community helped each other.

Johann's herd of 40 cows also kept them busy. Thankfully, Rosa already knew how to milk as 'every family back in Switzerland had a house cow which they had turns at milking.' The original cowshed was a three-cow plant and driven by a petrol engine, but in 1935, a new four-cow plant cowshed was built. Milk flowed about six metres along a chute to the milk stand and into milk cans. It was then taken to the Oaonui factory by horse and cart. As the farm was developed

and increased production, the milk then had to be taken by a wagon and two horses. As this was a cheese factory, they then brought whey home to feed their pigs.

In the early years, Rosa milked, cared for the family and tended the everyday chores – which were no easy feat. Her day started by lighting the coal range and preparing meals for the growing family. There was no kitchen sink or bench, so all work was done on the kitchen table with two kerosene lamps and candles for light. Washing was done with a washboard in a tub and boiled in the copper, rinsed and hand rung. Rosa once said, "boys are easier to rear, they just need a pair of pants and off they go". She sewed the boys pants, fully lined with pockets, and lovely garments for the girls too. The children were barefoot in summer and in winter shoes and hand knitted socks (the continental way). She later passed on the craft of sewing, knitting, and cooking to her daughters. Their Catholic faith was important to them and the family always dressed up to attend church. Johann in a suit and leather boots, Rosa and the girls in dresses and the boys in white shirts and navy suits.

During the Depression there was little money, but the children were always loved, clothed, and fed well. Crops were planted in a portion of the field, with mixtures of vegetables and of course potatoes! They felt incredibly lucky to be on a farm as they had milk, home kill meats (beef, sheep, and pigs), hens supplied eggs and chicken for soups and they had few fruit trees too. Swaggers called in many times, some just for a feed



Kurigers | Rosa milking one of their Jersey cows in 1977.



Kurigers | Cutting the 2020 celebration cakes are Francis Kuriger, Anna Bolger and Joseph Kuriger.



Kurigers | Anna Bolger, last surviving child of Johann and Rosa, lights at candle at their graveside.

and others for a bed. In return they were asked to chop wood or do odd jobs.

The children all worked hard alongside their parents and became proficient in all aspects of farming and domestic chores. These learning years would put them all in good stead for their predominantly farming futures.

In 1938 they took on a 15-year Maori lease farm on the Kina Road. In 1939 the family moved into a new house on the homestead... Rosa was in paradise! A kitchen with running hot and cold water, a long sink bench, enamel wood and coal range, electricity for lighting and ironing, even a telephone! There was a laundry and bath facilities... and a view of the mountain!

Sadly, Johann passed away quite suddenly, on August 6, 1942, aged 61. Johann and Rosa had 22 years of married life together in Oaonui. In late July Johann had his first heart attack, but refused to go to the hospital. The doctor prescribed medication and he seemed better. However, a few days later Johann had another attack, this time he agreed to go to hospital but died in the ambulance on the way. The funeral was held a couple of days later in Opunake. The family says that Johann and Rosa used to sing and yodel, but after Johann died, they never heard Rosa sing again.

All the learning in their early years, meant that the family could move forward supporting their mother after Johann's death, in running the farm as well as helping each other in their respective careers. Mary was married and living in Awatuna with a

young family. John, who was released from the army, joined Con and Lou and ran the family farm and leased land. In 1945 Con had a short stint in the army and upon his return took over the remaining lease (1945-1953) of land on Kina Road. Joe was already working for Mary's husband, Joe Hiestand, at Awatuna, though he made regular trips back to the home farm for visits and to attend to his bees. Len at 11 years old, left school to work on the home farm with his older brothers. As he got older, he did a lot of drain digging and wood chopping around the district. Alex who was nine, was never far from his mother's side and would chase the cows in and help her with many chores. Anna was just five and still to start school.

The years passed and the children all married and moved on with their spouses. Rosa lived out her remaining years on the Oaonui farm with son Lou. She continued to milk until the last year and would say she did not like it when the cows were dried off as she got lonely! Lou was her constant companion, making numerous trips around the mountain with her to visit the ever-growing family and making sure she never missed Sunday Mass.

Johann and Rosa's grandchildren span 38 years. Some have lived in the family home, down the track or along the road. One thing's for certain, many adventures and memories were made playing with the many cousins. Whether out on the farm building huts, playing dress-ups with Aunt Anna's clothes or simply drinking cups of tea with loads of scrumptious home baking, along with Rosa's

winter soup, made from the goodies from her gigantic vegetable garden.

Rosa passed away peacefully at home on June 15, 1983, aged 87, surrounded by family. A lady who never complained and went about life in her own wonderful quiet way. She lived a full and selfless life. Rosa was survived by her eight children, who all remained living in Taranaki, 45 grandchildren and growing numbers of greats!

Lynette Barnard (24th of 45 grandchildren)

To read the stories of Johann and Rosalina's eight children, please take time to pick up "The Kuriger Story - From Einsiedeln to Oaonui and Beyond", available from the library of books at the Taranaki Swiss Club.



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