

Background of the Recovery Efforts

By Kathy Petersen, Virginia KuneKunes

New Zealand is a land rich with the history of our dear KuneKunes. New Zealand is an island off the Southwest Pacific Ocean. It is mainly urban country with a north and south Island. Most populated areas are in Auckland, Christchurch, Wellington and Hamilton.

Our story begins one night when Michael Willis and John Simister of Staglands were enjoying some gin at 3:00 in the morning. John began to tell Michael about the breed of kunekunes describing them with their roly-poly fat, short legs that just kept their tummy off the ground, their short upturned snout, and their tassels or bells hanging under their chin. Michael did not believe John and thought this breed was something from the Walt Disney's world of fantasy. It would be another 12 months before he would see a KuneKune for himself when visiting Hilldale Zoo. Michael fell madly in love at first sight.

He searched and searched for kunekunes with very little success. His first break came with a phone call from a guy named Weasel, saying he had purchased a pair for him for \$3.00 each. When he arrived, the only resemblance to kunekunes was their wattles. One had 2 wattles and one had 1 wattle. He took them so as not to hurt the man's feelings.

The next stop was at Charlie Marshall's and he had more from the same litter as Weasel. Michael and John both bought 2 pigs each for \$10 for the two. Again, some were missing wattles, some had wattles and some only had 1 wattle. The next help came from Timi Kereopa, known as Kelly. After many stops at many Maori homes, finally they found some kunekunes. The family told him they were down at the river bed and if they could catch them, they could help themselves. They found a sow with about 10 piglets of various ages. They were able to gather some up but, the book does not mention how many they got. They do mention they suspect they are not purebred.

The next stop they were extremely pleased when they found two kunekunes that looked just like the description he had originally been told. The Maori people they met would not accept payment for them but, generously gave them the pigs. The next pig would come from a man named Paddy. The boar did not look purebred but, was different from the others that they had so far. Then they got a big sow from another gentleman that said she was as close to purebred as they came. Through several different contacts, they came upon a man named Ru Kotaha who had some kunekunes with wattles and just as described to him. He gave them a pair after hearing their story about their search for kunekunes and refused to take money. At this point, they had 13 pigs.

From another Maori family, they got a beautiful sow and boar and paid \$150 for the pair. Their next stop would take them to John Wilson. He was described as a hermit that was extremely protective of his pigs and anyone caught messing with them would be shot. John Wilson was nothing like people had described him to be. He had a least 30 kunekunes running in and out of the bushes. They were so excited to be greeted with a wave and a smile. John Wilson had been gathering up purebred kunekunes in an effort to preserve them over the years. He was upset that they were dying out and that no one was doing anything about it. When he heard

the story from Michael and John Simister, he was more than willing to help. This is where they received the boar, named Kelly. Kelly was a magnificent creature, huge for a Kune and a light gold in color. He was purchased for \$50 even though John Wilson did not want to take any money for him. They also got a young black and brown marbled sow about nine months old and a hand reared gilt about three months old. Now they had 18 pigs!

They wrote down two lists of the pigs, splitting the sexes and quality. They flipped a coin to see which list they were going to get. John Siminster of Stagland won Kelly. From this gathering two breeding programs were started.

Hoping to start the basis of some order in the pig's future, Michael contacted the Pig Breeders Association who would handle the registrations of the kunekunes. At that time, he established 6 sow lines and 3 boar lines.

The original lines that he named for the boars were Willowbank Ru, Willowbank Te Kuiti, and Willowbank Te Whangi. The original sow lines were Willowbank Waitomo, Willowbank Kereopa, Willowbank Awakino, Willowbank Marokopa, Willowbank Kopu and Willowbank Tammerdale.

Next History 101 we will take one of these lines and share more about the line and how they are represented in the USA.

**information from this article gathered from the book written by Michael Willis, published by Whitcoulls in 1982, "Some of my Best Friends are Animals".