

Te Poi's buzzing and Big John is smiling

When the dairy factory at Te Poi closed 20 years ago, many thought it spelled the end of the small Waikato township. But Wintec journalism student Cleo Fraser found there is plenty of life in Te Poi, especially on Monday nights.

Monday night is Young Farmers' Night at the Big Cow in Te Poi and the place is going off.

The jukebox is blaring in the corner and the pub's owner, Big John Dalton, has turned on the deep fryer.

It's 5.30pm and the carpark is packed with tractors, trucks and Holdens.

Farmers wearing Swannodris, heavy work boots, and the odd Metallica t-shirt are lined up at the bar. Young Farmers' Night also means cheap beer.

The farmers shout greetings and slap each other on the back. In the restaurant to one side of the bar, a family on its way to Rotorua sits quietly eating fish and chips, watching the proceedings.

"She's got healthy hooves and a beautiful rump," says one man, his voice almost drowned out by a track from the Black Eyed Peas.

Dalton changes the keg. It's still early evening, but the party has begun.

Twenty years earlier, no one would have predicted Te Poi's survival.

On May 25, 1987 the tiny township 11km from Matamata came close to dying after its primary employer, the Sunny Park-Hinuera Co-Operative's dairy factory was closed down.

More than 600 people packed into the factory's concrete storeroom to watch the auctioneer sell the factory along with 10 houses, four sections, an administration building, seven small farms and a dairy unit.

"How much will you give me for Te Poi?" said the headline in the Waikato Times.

Six months before, the dairy co-operative announced it was moving its operation to Hautapu, near Cambridge.

At the time the Te Poi factory was the highest butter producer in the country but the factory, owned by local farmers until 1982, was deemed uneconomic due to falling milk prices and a reduction in milk supply from the district's farms.

The factory's 54 dairy workers were made redundant and most had no choice but to uproot their families and leave the district.

Don King, one of 17 milk tanker drivers serving the factory, says only about four people stayed. He says it was the break-up of a vibrant and close-knit



PICTURE: Kelly Schicker

STAYING PUT: Big John Dalton, owner of the Big Cow, moved to Te Poi a year ago and says it's a great community.



DIVERSIFYING: Te Poi's former dairy factory is now used for storage.

Farming is still the main employer but others have moved to the township for the rural lifestyle and cheap housing.

The town now consists of a Mobil station, the Te Poi Cafe, the old dairy factory, a church, which hosts combined services monthly, a knitwear shop, a play centre, a tennis club and the Te Poi School.

community.

"We were a family," he says. "Every Christmas we'd have a hangi at the Te Poi Hall."

King says in 1987, Te Poi had a dairy, a Four Square store and a town hall, which was the focal point for community activities including sports such as badminton.

He moved to Matamata, just before the announcement of the factory closure.

"Te Poi is a lot different now," he says. "There's nothing there for me but if I could go back to the way it was I would."

But for new residents, including Big John Dalton, Te Poi is far from dead.

"Last week we had a speed dating night," says the pub owner.

"We've had bus loads of people turn up, plus stag nights, and we're hosting a 70-plus wedding reception in a few weeks."

Built in 1992 - seven years after the dairy factory closed - the Big Cow (proper name Te Poi Country Tavern and Restaurant) has become the focal point for a new community.

Dalton and his wife Marion, who moved to the district a year ago, say they intend to be there for a few years. "It's a great community."

Dalton says an increasing number of travellers call in for a meal, or just to have a look around.

"I haven't had a day off since I arrived a year ago."

Set in the middle of lush farmland on the crossroads of SH29 and Tapapa-Te Poi and Te Poi Roads, Te Poi currently has a population of 800.

In 1987, when the school held its 75th jubilee, the roll was 87 and predicted to reach 140. By 1995, after the community raised funds for new technology, it reached 155 but since then there has been a steady decline. Today, there are 30 students, aged from five to 12 and two teachers, including principal John Muir.

Muir, who lives in the school house and who has been at the school since 1988, says he's one of the last of the so-called "country principals". Acting as a jack-of-all-trades, he's also a teacher, cleaner, gardener, sports co-ordinator, administrator and guitar teacher.

Muir is passionate about the school and hopes it will continue to serve future generations. "I think parents and children like the country education, we like to involve children in the running of the school. I can't remember the last time I raised my voice."

Back down at the Big Cow the 30-odd young farmers - mostly men - have nothing but praise for the community. However, they would like more women. At the last count, there were 420 men and 369 women.

"If you wanted to you could be out every night," says Bryce Henderson, who with his wife and son runs a mechanic business at the rear of the petrol station.

Henderson moved to Te Poi from Mt Maunganui in 1992. He says there is never a shortage of things to do. "There's awesome fishing, bush walking, trekking and hunting - and there's plenty of jobs."

And he says house prices are rising. "We bought our house for \$103,000 and it's now valued at over \$180,000."

As for the Sunny Park dairy factory, it's still standing but these days it is only used for storage.

Once it was the place where cockies debated the price of milk and the attributes of their livestock. These days, that's done over a beer at the Big Cow. Big John Dalton's not complaining.