

The First Scarlet Geranium in Otago!

Written for the Otago Daily Times. By Elizabeth Gordon.

Among the chronicles of the early pioneers in Otago occurs this quaint record: "The first scarlet geranium was brought from Home to Otago by a woman, who kept the plant alive during her long voyage." A simple statement of an apparently trivial fact! Is it a trivial fact or the revelation of a high ideal? If this woman could, amidst all the turmoil of leaving her old home for a new country, think of bringing a plant of scarlet geranium, she must have had a vision before her—a vision not only of acquiring land and a fortune, or of merely making a living, but a vision of a home. More than that. She had an appreciation of what life really is, or ought to be. For that plant, cherished during the long months of the voyage, stood for intangible things, for beauty, for joy, for rich, overflowing life. She might not, could not, realise it fully anywhere, but she brought the ideal here to this land. A beautiful country it was, but rough, houseless, roadless, bare often of the very necessaries of life. So almost unendurably hard was the life, one wonders how so many women came through it. They did not all bring plants from Home; but the ideal symbolised by a flower garden was in the hearts of most, if not of all, the women pioneers. One of the leaders, Mrs Cargill, wife of the colonist who—later became the Superintendent of Otago, was an ardent lover of flowers, and by giving plants and seeds from her own garden encouraged the women to remember, in spite of the crushing hardships they endured, that life could still be beautiful. The families that left the little settlement in Dunedin and pushed on further into the country—can you see them? For weeks the wagon trailed along, as best it could. No roads, no tracks, no bridges. The streams could be forded, though often under great difficulties; . but the rivers had to be crossed in a boat by the **passengers**, while the horses and cattle were made to swim over them. Sometimes th'e provisions were soaked with water. The sun was oppressively hot, or the rain poured down. In the midst of it all, undaunted, the women cared for their children; and hope kept ever before them a vision, the vision of a home. They came to the journey's end at last. Some temporary shelter had to be found; then the women helped their husband to drag material for their houses. They collected coarse grass for thatch, helped to split shingles for the roof, and mixed clay for the walls. What then? Then they assisted in bringing material to fence a garden. Not a garden in which to grow vegetables only. Far from it. Life was going to be for them something more than a mere struggle for existence. There was to be colour in it,, and hope and beauty. One woman had, in the end, a beautiful home, where it was her joy to welcome passing travellers and provide a meal for them. Though she might have to do this several times in one day, her patience stood the test. And so overflowing was her sympathy for the weary wayfarer that, if she should be obliged to leave home for the day, a meal was left ready on the table, and a notice, " Stranger, help thyself." What such hospitality must have meant to heart-sick, hard-pressed people, we can in some degree imagine. Just to read the record is to feel a glow of pride that such women were among the early pioneers of Otago. In Dunedin at the present time few houses are without a garden, be it ever so

small. But whether an acre or only a few yards in extent, there is one flower that one will seldom fail to see. Set right across the front of the house, or half way round, in patches, forming a long border of brilliance from the gate to the front door, in flower pots, grows scarlet geranium. Glowing emblem of life as it should be —radiantly courageous, abundant, beautiful. Many, many years ago, throughout a long voyage, a woman cherished a plant and an ideal. So came to Otago the first scarlet geranium.