

THIS IS THE STORY OF A FREE-SPIRITED YOUNG WOMAN CALLED ESTHER JAMES.

A woman of abundant talents, she was by turns architect, inventor and New Zealand's first fashion model.

She was also the first recorded person to walk the length of New Zealand and it is in this guise that we join her for our story.

It all begins in 1931 during the Great Depression. The economy was trying to recover from a massive slump and something was urgently needed to lift the flagging spirits of the nation.

Esther came up with the idea of walking the entire length of the country, wearing NZ made clothes and shoes and eating NZ made foods. This would, she felt, highlight to all New Zealanders and perhaps the rest of the world, just how good New Zealand made products were.

This wasn't the first promotion that had been done on behalf of Buy Kiwi Made. Indeed there had been any number of exhibitions and advertising campaigns aimed at promoting locally made goods, beginning with the "New Zealand Industries Week" of 1908.

But undoubtedly this was the first time that an individual had gone to such lengths to champion the cause.

Esther took her idea to the Manufacturers' Association and once she gained their consent, set about organising the logistics. No small task and one that is a tale in its own right. However, for the purposes of this story, we will skip over it and fast forward to the evening of December 1st, 1931.

This was Esther's last night before the walk was due to begin. And she spent it at the Te Pahi sheep station in the company of Ken Richardson (son of the Mayor of Auckland) and his wife. Evidently a good time was had by all, as Esther didn't end up getting to bed until well after midnight; hardly the ideal preparation.

Despite this, she was up bright and early the next morning, although presumably feeling a little the worse for wear. Her pedometer was sealed and set at zero by the Mayor and the walk began at 10.45 am.

Almost immediately she ran into difficulties. Her first stop, Te Kao, was 19 miles away. It was very hot and she was somewhat tired from the previous evening's carousing. In addition, there was absolutely no shade on the narrow track and she was unsuitably dressed in a woollen skirt and blazer.

Finally she spied a tree and sat down under its welcoming shade. She lay down for a minute and promptly fell asleep for two hours. When she awoke she was mortified. As she states in her book "Jobbing Along",

"I WAS ASHAMED. WHAT A WAY TO START A WALK OF 1600 MILES. HOW PEOPLE WOULD LAUGH IF THEY KNEW: THE TIRELESS MARATHON WALKER ASLEEP BY THE ROAD ON THE FIRST DAY."

Right then and there she decided that never again would she fall asleep by the side of the road. And by her own account she never did.

From the outset, the walk

was a fairly leisurely affair. Esther's primary goal was never

speed, but rather to promote New Zealand made goods, and with this in mind an itinerary was devised that allowed her to visit as many manufacturers as possible.

One only has to look at the numbers to see just how circuitous her route was. The distance from Spirits Bay to Bluff is only 975 miles as the crow flies, and yet Esther ended up walking 1600 miles at an average speed of 12.21 miles a day. Not bad for someone who was just over five feet tall and tipped the scales at only seven stone.

The emphasis of the walk was firmly placed on promoting primary foodstuffs, clothing, leather goods and farm related industry.

Esther's intent was to prove to New Zealanders that, **"IN SPITE OF THE GRIMNESS OF THE PASSING DEPRESSION, WE STILL HAD THE SPIRIT TO GET UP AND DO THINGS AND MAKE THINGS - AND TO MAKE AND DO THEM WELL."**

But if this was her primary aim, she was also not blind to the fact that her idea would make her famous, get her in every paper and radio station, and ensure a darned good travel experience free of expense and with accommodation at some first class hotels.

And so it turned out. Everywhere she went she was welcomed as a celebrity. Dinners were laid on for her, pipe bands played her into town, poems were penned in her honour and she routinely received proposals of marriage.

It seemed as though the farmer's daughter from the Wairarapa had struck a chord with her buy Kiwi message, and given a nation, battered and bruised by the privations of the Depression, something to cheer about.

Not to mention an excuse to have a first-class party. Virtually every town put on a dance in Esther's honour. And although this was often the last thing she felt like doing, she played along with good grace.

"FIRST I WAS LED OUT FOR THE OPENING WALTZ BY THE MAYOR, THEN THE REST OF THE CIVIC DIGNITARIES CLAIMED ME FOR A DANCE IN STRICT PECKING ORDER."

One of the features of the walk - which was very much a light-hearted affair - was that people, including dignitaries and well-known poets would look out for her as she approached their town, offer her

a ride and then sign the log with, **"OFFERED MISS JAMES A RIDE, BUT SHE DECLINED"**.

Other humorous moments included a chance encounter with a French girl who had received an extremely amorous letter from a local Kiwi lad. As her English was somewhat sketchy she asked Esther to read it to her, but first of all stuck her fingers in Esther's ears to ensure she couldn't hear what she was reading. Another time at Hampden, Esther got embarrassingly caught out by a member of the audience.

"I'VE WALKED THROUGH MOST OF NEW ZEALAND NOW AND THIS IS THE PRETTIEST TOWN I HAVE SEEN." UP LEAPT A MAN FROM THE AUDIENCE. **"THAT'S WHAT YOU TOLD THE PEOPLE IN THE LAST TOWN,"** HE BRISTLED. **"I KNOW,"** SHE REPLIED LAMELY, **"BUT WHEN I TOLD THEM THAT I HADN'T SEEN YOUR TOWN"**.

But it wasn't all fun and games. Esther encountered her fair share of hardships as well, including a large earthquake in Palmerston North, landslips in the Manawatu



In 1931 Esther James walked from Spirits Bay to Stewart Island to support buy Kiwi made. You only have to walk to the shops.

Gorge and enormous breakers that swamped the road on the stretch between Blenheim and Kaikoura.

On top of this, she also had to endure endless rounds of press interviews, sessions with photographers and a never-ending stream of autograph hunters.

Nevertheless, she received unwavering support from the entire nation, including farmers, athletes, racing car drivers, the Prime Minister and the Governor-General.

This undoubtedly gave her the strength to keep going through even the toughest times. Like the occasion when she hit the Canterbury Plains and encountered the longest stretch of straight, level road in the country.

"IT WAS LIKE BEING ON A TREADMILL, THERE WAS SO LITTLE CHANGE IN THE IMMEDIATE SCENERY AND SO LITTLE FEELING OF PROGRESS."

Or when she arrived in Bluff on 18th June, 1932, at the official end of her walk, only to find that the people of Stewart Island wanted her to include them on her tour as well. So Esther donned her worn out shoes again, hopped on the steamer Tamatea and duly walked the fifteen miles across the island.

But finally it was all over. Esther was the toast of the nation and in many people's eyes assumed almost mythical proportions. As one young man said while unknowingly dancing with her at Bluff,

"I'VE COME ALL THE WAY FROM GORE TO SEE THIS BIG HIKING WOMAN. I BET SHE'S BUILT LIKE AN AMAZON, EIGHT FEET TALL WITH FEET THE SIZE OF A DRAUGHT HORSE."

We can only imagine his mortification on discovering that his petite dancing partner was in fact none other than the Amazon.

History relates that he hurriedly left the dancehall, blushing profusely as he went.

But while this may have been the end of Esther's journey, that of the Buy Kiwi Made movement is still going from strength to strength.

We now have a manufacturing sector that involves more than 20,000 companies and employs a quarter of a million people.

And whereas in Esther's day the manufacturing emphasis was on food, clothing and primary industries, today we are also world leaders in making things for the recreational marine sector, fashion, agricultural and timber products, as well as high tech products like digital content and electronics.

And 100 years from now, who knows what we'll be manufacturing? Hover prams, personal robots? Whatever it is, there's one thing you can be sure of. New Zealand's manufacturing sector will continue to play a vital role in our economy.

But to make sure this happens we need your continued support. Because every time you buy something that's made in New Zealand, you're contributing to the story too. You're helping to keep wheels turning, people working and our prosperity growing.

And you can start doing your bit right now. Because April is Buy Kiwi Mad month.

We're celebrating 100 years of buying Kiwi made. Plus it's the 20th birthday of the Buy New Zealand Made Campaign Ltd and the 76th anniversary of Esther's historic walk.

And while she may have walked 1600 miles to promote New Zealand made goods, rest assured, a little bit of support from you goes a long way too.

