

# First Year on the Thames Goldfield & other stories

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## **An extraordinary feat**



The Little German Traveller  
Frederick Christian Schafer  
*State Library Victoria*

*Patterson Brothers, photographer.*

In 1868, Frederick Christian Schafer, the renowned German traveller, was making a tour of New Zealand on foot. While this was unusual in itself, even more noteworthy was the fact that Mr Schafer was a dwarf.

The *Canterbury Times*, calling him '**A Distinguished Traveller**', enthused that he was "undoubtedly the most remarkable traveler of this or any other age." He had just arrived in Christchurch, overland from Dunedin, having recently come from Victoria, Australia.

The distinguished traveller, though, complained that in all his wanderings, in many lands among many people, he had never met with more real **rudeness and incivility** than on the journey from Dunedin to Christchurch. "We trust Mr Schafer...will receive the attention and consideration to which he is entitled," scolded the *Times*, " and that his remembrances of Canterbury will be such as to give the province an honourable place in the book of travels which he intends to give to the world."

This jarring note in the journey of Mr Schafer heralded difficult times ahead, for New Zealand, and **particularly Thames**, was to be the **downfall of him**.

'Little Schafer' was a native of Hesse Cassel, Germany. He told a Dunedin reporter that he was born in Carlhafen on 23 November, 1836. His father was a hotel keeper. Although not truly a dwarf, he was referred to as such. He had been **run over by a coach** at the age of eight which so injured his back he was permanently crippled with a curvature of the spine.

He was only 4 ft 8 or 9 inches tall. When he became old enough to work he was taken into a lawyer's office and while there, resolved to journey over the world, walking where possible.

His great object was to write a book of travel which would be a unique record of his personal adventures and observations.

He commenced his travels in 1852, at the age of 16. He carried an autograph book and a diary. In his autograph book he had many signatures, from those of **crowned heads to primitive preachers**.

He travelled without money, relying upon the charity of those he met along the way. He often made do on **bread and water**, but Freemasons, Oddfellows and other friendly societies lent him aid, and railway and steamboat companies regularly gave him a free pass.

After travelling New Zealand, he proposed to visit Mauritius, Madagascar, the East Indies, Siberia, and the northern portions of Asia and Europe. He calculated this would occupy about three years. He estimated during his 16 years of travel he had gone over 150,000 miles - 100,000 of them on foot.

Schafer had spent **seven years walking** the different German states. Between 1859 and 1863 he travelled through Denmark, Holland, Belgium, England, France, Spain, Italy, the northern part of Africa, Palestine (including Jerusalem) Turkey, Greece and Russia, before heading back to Germany. He then sailed to America where he visited 24 states.

He walked over the Rocky Mountains, **suffering very great hardships** among the Indian tribes and, in 1866, arrived in California. From there he went to Japan and China, and visited the islands of Batavia and Sumatra among others. He then sailed for Australia, proceeding from Sydney to Melbourne, Adelaide, Tasmania, and back to Melbourne, from where he left for New Zealand aboard the *Omeo*. While she lay

at Bluff, he went on to Invercargill, arriving on February 17, 1868.

He then walked up to Dunedin and continued his travels to Christchurch, Hokitika, the Grey, the Buller, Nelson and Wellington.

Schafer arrived in Wellington on the s.s. Airedale, impressing the *Independent* newspaper with the information that he could easily walk 40 miles a day and, by pushing it, could reach 52. In seven successive days he had walked 240 miles "which is certainly **a great feat for a man only four feet eight inches in height**, who labours under the physical infirmity of an injured back besides."

Mr Schafer now stated that he had experienced much kindness from the people he came across on his journey, but with limited financial resources, the reporter prompted "whoever may encounter the traveler in the North Island" to **help the little German on his way.**

From Wellington, Schafer tramped overland to Waipukurau, reaching there in a sorry state, but being hospitably received by the residents. He continued on to Napier, and in June the *Hawkes Bay Herald* noted "Mr Schafer arrived in Napier on Wednesday last; and he intends very shortly proceeding to Auckland by way of Taupo and the Hot Springs, certainly an **arduous undertaking** at this season of the year."

From Napier he set off for Taupo and this leg of the journey took him one month - Schafer having stopped at one or two places at the invitation of Maori chiefs.

By the time he reached Tauranga in August, he had walked eleven hundred miles in New Zealand.

The *Daily Southern Cross's* Tauranga correspondent noted Schafer "is by all accounts an **extraordinary pedestrian**, having accomplished some great feats . . . in one case having walked six and a half miles in one hour and twenty seven minutes, and in another thirty seven miles in a little less than five hours."

Schafer was delighted with the appearance and climate of Tauranga, which he said excelled that of any other place he had ever seen. "This opinion, from an intelligent observer, who had travelled nearly all over the world is no small tribute of praise to our beautiful district." effused the correspondent.

Schafer tramped on, and after ten days overland from Tauranga, he arrived in Shortland, Thames, which a year earlier had been discovered as a goldfield.

The local correspondent reported that Schafer "was very much pleased with the look of this part of the country and expressed the opinion that the country from Waihi to Ohinemuri was the **best looking gold bearing country** that he had seen in all his travels through the Australian colonies."

He had picked up a gold specimen on the road from Waihi to Ohinemuri. "He is very much pleased at the kind hospitality shown him by the natives here," added the correspondent.

Schafer spoke in the highest terms of the courtesy extended towards him by the Hauhaus, through whose country he had come and with whom he spent several days. The Hauhaus, an anti-European Maori religion that had thrived in the North Island, were feared by many for their **random violence** on isolated European communities. Mr Schafer had no such qualms.

Although heavy rains and flooding rivers had hampered his progress, he was "anxious to pay the district another visit in order to renew his acquaintance with the Hauhau tribes."

They had very kindly presented him with greenstones, tiahaha's and mats. Schafer now planned to proceed to Auckland and afterwards return into the interior to continue his travels.



Frederick Christian Schafer, 1867.  
*National Library of Australia – 23149135*

In mid September, the *Daily Southern Cross* carried the startling headline "Mr Schafer to be married to a Maori." The ambitious little traveller had "become **enamoured with a young dark-skinned lady** of the native race and therefore proposes to settle down." His betrothed lived with a tribe at Ohinemuri.

Schafer also announced plans to conclude his history of travels, publish them, return to Germany, finish his journey through Russia and Siberia and finally, after completing all his travels; return to become a New Zealand colonist.

But the admiring headlines tracking the fascinating footsteps of the German globetrotter now took an ominous tone. The *New Zealand Herald* crossly announced "...the German pedestrian Schafer has been representing himself to the Upper Thames Maoris as a nephew of the Queen of England . . . on the strength of this relationship he has been hospitably entertained by the native chiefs . . . and been presented with valuable mats, Maori weapons and ornaments, several of which he has since sold . . . we cannot too **strongly condemn such conduct.**"

And the apparent romantic ending to his lonely trek across the world was suddenly in tatters. In November various newspapers carried the headline "The German traveller and his Maori bride; and how they quarreled."

The *Thames Advertiser's* special correspondent reported, with barely suppressed mirth, "a most comical episode is the description of the appearance of 'Little Schafer' and his '**Loves and Grief's**' among the Maoris."

The correspondent, while visiting Maori settlements in the Upper Thames, was in discussion with Chief Ropata when, "in the course of a few minutes, who should make his appearance but that celebrated individual, Mr Schafer, the great pedestrian traveler, who at once commenced a complaint of the treatment he had received at the hands of Ropata and his tribe."

An interpreter explained to Ropata the dissatisfaction's of Mr Schafer. Mr Schafer said he had been living amongst the tribe for two months. Shortly after he arrived in the settlement, he had **allotted to him a young Maori lady in marriage**. They had lived very happily together until recently, when his 'fair lady', without any explanation, expressed a wish to leave him. In consequence of this, she was taken away by her parents.

Chief Ropata sent for Mrs Schafer - **a young lady of modest appearance** and remarkably good looking. She informed the group in excellent English that her name was Lizzie, she was 15 years old, she had left St Stephen's Native Girl's School nine months earlier and that she was a near relative of Chief Ropata.

After some discussion a jury was selected consisting of four Maori and four Europeans.

**"The most remarkable trial on record"**, the astonished correspondent advised, was held in a whare.

Lizzie stated she did not wish to live with Schafer. He had a shawl of hers and she had a ring of his. She also said that Schafer had given her father £2, that her father had then given it to her, and that she had **bought a pig** with it, which Schafer helped her to eat.

When Schafer came to live with the tribe he brought with him one and half hundredweight of flour, three pounds of tea, two pounds of coffee, some candles and some cooking utensils.

Schafer admitted having given Lizzie the ring, but denied giving her the shawl. He

denied the pig had been purchased with the £2, and alleged that they were still owing to him by the girl's father. The father was also in possession of a blanket which Schafer claimed to have returned.

Schafer expressed his willingness to **leave his wife** in the settlement, upon having the ring, the £2, the shawl and the cooking utensils returned.

The father stated he had given the blanket to a boatman, for bringing Schafer's traps from Shortland to the settlement.

The chief's wife said that she had cooked for Schafer the whole time he had been in the settlement, and she thought she was fairly entitled to retain the cooking utensils, which were of a trifling value.

Mr Schafer had been supplied with a whare but he furnished nothing towards his own or his wife's support beyond the few things already mentioned.

Other evidence obtained "somewhat promiscuously" suggested that a cutter had come up to the settlement, sailed by two Europeans, and Mrs Schafer had been **enticed on board**.

Schafer had felt aggrieved and tried to induce her to return, but was unable to persuade her. A scuffle ensued between Schafer and the men on board in which, Schafer alleged, he received some very serious injuries, later revealed as nothing more serious than a smack in the face.

Mrs Ropata accused the "illustrious German stranger" of being **very partial to ladies society**.

The jury decided that Schafer should leave the settlement for **being a nuisance** and disturbing its peace. Likewise, he should take his wife with him - the chief considering that he was legally married, according to Maori custom.

Lizzie's friends refused to allow her to go with Schafer, and he refused to leave the settlement without his things. The jury then retired into the open air to consider their verdict.

After a short deliberation they unanimously decided that Lizzie should retain the ring, the shawl should be returned, and the cooking utensils should be returned by Mrs Ropata. They also decided that the £2 should not be returned to Schafer and that he was not entitled to the blankets. Schafer should leave the settlement on the following day, **escorted in a canoe** to the steamer, *Clyde*.

The verdict was delivered in both English and Maori and appeared to give very general satisfaction.

The party adjourned to Ropata's whare where the shawl was given to Lizzie. "We must not omit to mention that the whole proceedings connected with this memorable trial were conducted with the **most rigid decorum**," reported the correspondent approvingly.

Punctually, at 5 o'clock the next day, Ropata's canoe appeared and Mr Schafer was safely delivered aboard the *Clyde* with his baggage. As the steamer left the Maori's gave a very hearty cheer.

The press across New Zealand gleefully reprinted the details of "The loves and battles of the universal traveler" but a few days later there came the **worrying report** " . . . that the troubles of the unfortunate little German traveler, Mr Schafer, have affected his spirits . . ."

He had been staying at an Auckland hotel where his general conduct, bordering on extremely eccentric, suddenly became rather outrageous.

An attempt to choke himself was stopped by some bystanders, after which he rushed out into the night. He was next discovered by police on the wharf in a very excited condition and in **possession of a dagger**. He was disarmed and taken to his hotel where he remained, apparently "in his right mind."

The next afternoon, however, Constable Clark was called from his beat in Queen Street to the Custom House Wharf. He found Mr Schafer in a very exhausted condition, having just been pulled from the water by two seamen.

He had been observed by them to place his hat under a piece of wood so that it might not blow away, raise his **hands to the clouds**, mumbling, then jump into the water which was about 8 t deep.

Schafer was taken to a hotel where brandy was administered. Dr Nicholson arrived, applied the usual remedies and restoratives and Mr Schafer began to recover his strength. He was **rolled up in blankets** and conveyed on a stretcher to the police station. Here he was detained to give an account of his extraordinary behaviour, pending a charge of attempted suicide.

His hat, on being recovered, was found to contain a letter addressed to someone in Melbourne and a piece of paper containing German verse which, when translated, contained the words "**Fare you well, fare you well...**", as well as some lines about his journey being finished.

Germans in the province of Nelson were scandalised at the stories of Mr Schafer's amours among the Maoris, and were determined to vindicate his reputation. "They will certainly be friends in need," said the *Daily Southern Cross*, "for Mr Schafer...is now in the Mount Eden stockade."

A deputation to the Consul-General for Hamburg, resident in Nelson, requested him to absolve Mr Schafer's character from the aspersions thrown upon it.

The once feted wayfarer was released from Mount Eden Gaol and money was raised to pay his passage to Melbourne where he was to serve the rest of his sentence. Mr Schafer was said to be in poor health, and used to an outdoor life, there were fears that confinement **would kill him**.

Six months later, in May 1869, the *Melbourne Argus* announced that Schafer, "the poor little German traveller", had been released from Melbourne Gaol and "appears to be wandering about, uncertain where to go or what to do. It is a pity that this **unfortunate wanderer** should be so left. He was unlucky in coming to these shores, where everyone is busy, and few are romantic or sentimental enough to sympathise with the motives which induced him to leave his fatherland and visit strange nations."

The world that Schafer had intrepidly striven so hard to see had washed its hands of him.

"Of course, to expect anything from him in the nature of a book of travels is out of the question . . . he mistook his vocation utterly when he proposed to narrate what he saw and experienced in a trip round the world," harrumphed the *Argus*, although it was sympathetic enough to suggest financial contributions would enable Schafer to leave the colony and go home.



By mid 1870, it was reported that "Schafer, the great little traveller, has given up his vagabond life and is now making an honest living by tailoring in Melbourne."

A few months later however, Schafer applied for admission to the Benevolent Asylum. He was suffering from chronic rheumatism which prevented him from working and he was "altogether **in a miserable plight.**"

He did not remain an inmate of the Benevolent Asylum for long however. He had received a letter, and in accordance with regulations, it was opened in the presence of the Superintendent. It was found to contain a cheque for £1 12 s 10d, from Adelaide.

Schafer refused to sign an acknowledgement for the cheque unless it was given to him to spend. The Superintendent refused and Schafer elected to leave the Asylum, which he did at once.

It later transpired Schafer had been in receipt of £1 per week since June from the Albion Lodge of the Manchester Unity Order of Odd Fellows at Adelaide.



**Twenty five years later**, in 1906, 'Old Chum' wrote of his recollections of Frederick Schafer the great German traveller, for the *NZ Truth* newspaper. Entitled 'Maoriland Memories', it recalled their meeting 40 years previously in Sydney, prior to Schafer's fateful journey to New Zealand.

The **diminutive nomad** was then an active and energetic little fellow, full of talk and reminisce, and always alert for a new autograph for his book, which he carried in a wallet slung over his shoulder. He claimed to have traveled over a great portion of the globe and was 31 when 'Old Chum' encountered him.

During his travels in America, he met President Johnson, whose guest he was for three weeks. He visited all the chief cities in the United States and traveled all the way from Portland, Maine, to San Francisco, mostly on foot.

He was three weeks in Salt Lake City and had many conversations with the Mormon prophet, Brigham Young, whom Schafer described as a very courteous, well informed man.

From San Francisco he went to Hong Kong, then to Java intending to return to Europe by way of India and China and from there across the Great Desert and Russian Tartary, visiting Siberia before returning to his native Hesse Cassel.

Among the signatures in his autograph book were the **hieroglyphics of the Emperor of China**, who would not allow him to enter Peking. 'Old Chum' was doubtful of this signature- he was under the impression it had been done by a 'rubber stamp', which he didn't think was invented at the time. Schafer, however, had plenty of genuine signatures - President Johnson, General Grant and Pope Pius IX among them.

He also had a collection of official seals. His book contained thousands of signatures and numerous recommendations. He also boasted a collection of 6000 photographs and a **miniature museum of curios**.

He planned to donate his collection to a German museum once his book was written. 'Old Chum' recounted Schafer's Maori marriage and his subsequent fall from grace. "I don't know what eventually became of the unfortunate traveller," wrote 'Old Chum', "and I would be glad if some reader will let me know how he finished up."

Frederick Schafer had 'finished up' on 24 January, 1881 at Callan Park Hospital for the Insane, Sydney. He had been found **hatless and bootless**, shrieking and foaming at the mouth.

The Masonic Brethren had paid his expenses home to Germany, but he had found his way back to Sydney.

The man who performed such an extraordinary feat was described on admission as "a little deformed man with spinal curvature" with blue eyes and a fair complexion, in a thin but clean condition. His general health was below par. He stood at 4 feet 4 ½ inches tall and weighed 95 pounds (43 kilos). He was 45.

His previous occupation was listed as 'traveller', he had no residence and no friends or relations anywhere but Germany. He "could not say" if he was married, single or widowed. He was assessed as **not "a fit person to be at large"**. His form of mental disorder was given as mania.

Schafer was now very childlike in his manner, loquacious and rambling in his speech and easily moved to tears and laughter.

His medical notes chart a sad, steady decline over the next 11 months. He was frequently very noisy by day and night, screaming at the top of his voice, imagining that he was going to die. Although he gradually put on weight – 101 lbs by October – in November he started having epileptic fits followed by unconsciousness, the fits and stupor becoming more frequent.

By mid-January 1882 he had been confined to bed for a fortnight, eating very little. Although still destructive, he was extremely feeble. The renowned German traveller finally ended his journey about 7.30 on the evening of 26 January 1881.

Of Frederick Schafer's vast collection of autographs, mementos, photographs and book notes there appears to be no trace. Callan Park records make no note of any possessions. Possibly they were scattered or stolen during the last years of his distressed wanderings. It was a dismal end for the man who walked around the world, briefly finding love in Thames, New Zealand.

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Lizzie, Schafer's Maori bride, made a couple of appearances in the Thames court before disappearing from view. She was evidently well known locally, attracting descriptions such as the "irrepressible half caste."

In October 1870, the same month that Schafer applied for relief to the Melbourne Benevolent home, his wife, then aged 17 or 18, was charged by Mrs Welsh, of the Shortland Hotel, Thames, with stealing a dress, a petticoat, a handkerchief and a locket.

Lizzie was described as "the intelligent half caste who enslaved the affections of the little German Schafer, the erratic traveler."

Lizzie carried out her own cross examination of Mrs Welsh - "quite a professional cross examination at the hands of the sharp half caste," observed a reporter.

Sergeant Lloyd deposed to finding the dress in Lizzie's tent. For the defence, a Maori woman named Mary Anne was called. She said she had been present when the articles said to have been stolen were given to Lizzie by a white woman. Lizzie Schafer, however, was found guilty and sentenced to one month's imprisonment with hard labour.

Six months later, Lizzie again appeared in court in a curious case where a gold locket was stolen from her and she herself was charged with stealing a gold watch and chain. She also prosecuted this case.

Court reports were exasperatedly headed "Mrs Schafer Again."  
Lizzie also went by the name Williams. The boarding school she said she attended was established by the Kissling's and was the forerunner of St Stephen's School, a boarding school for Maori boys at Bombay, south Auckland. No school records remain of that era or the irrepressible Lizzie, who so ensnared the heart of the little German traveller.

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**Sources:**

*Papers Past, National Library NZ.*

*Callan Park Hospital for the Insane records, NSW State records.*

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