

Captain Emilius Le Roy, Sailmaker

by his grandson - A. E. Le Roy

If ever a firm was well-known in Auckland from very early days up to the present, it would be Le Roy's sail and tent making business. It was a part, of the commercial scene, a very important unit, for some hundred and thirty years, and a household word among yachtsmen, farmers, campers and the early railway builders. We can imagine how essential a part of the colonial business world a sail-loft would be, especially in a town like Auckland, whose commerce came largely by scow and cutter and schooner. Le Roy's would be known to all the captains and boat owners.

Emilius Le Roy was born in Guernsey, in the Channel Islands, in 1827. His family was French, probably emigre's from the Revolution of 1789; there were a number of French families in the Channel Islands, but, as the islands are only small, many of the young men, finding little employment available locally, took to a sea-faring, life. It appears that Emilius learnt the trade of sail-making first and then became a sailor, serving for a time in the British Navy. He lived for a year or so in London and here, being very musical, he played the cello for a period in the London Philharmonic Orchestra. He came to New Zealand about 1847 and for a few years was on a schooner trading to Australia. In 1852 he was captain for the schooner "Iliomana" (the Hawaiian word for greyhound) of 68 tons register, built at Baltimore. This ship had been wrecked in the Hauraki Gulf in 1850 and was sold as she lay for E 95 to Mr Niccol, ship builder, of Auckland. Repairs took a full twelve months and the schooner was totally wrecked at East Cape in July 1853 under a different captain, so it appears that Captain Le Roy can have been in charge of the ship for only about two years. When she left Sydney in April 1852, under Captain Le Roy, she carried five passengers and a mixed cargo, the contents being printed in small type as indicative of the varied imports usual in that year.

After this voyage, which was extremely stormy, the "Iliomana" losing her topmast on the way, Captain Le Roy left the sea and set up in business in Auckland as a sail-maker. His premises seems to have been at first in Fort St, which was then on the waterfront and it seems to have prospered quite early, for he sent to the Channel Islands for

his fiancée to join him as soon as he felt himself established. The lady was

Catherine Tabel, of an aristocratic French family, but her parents were at first unwilling to allow her to come out to a wild place such as New Zealand was then. She managed, however, to persuade them to allow her to accompany her brother as far as Sydney and from there she was able to take ship to Auckland.



Catherine and Emilius were married in 1855 in the Methodist Church in High St and they made their home in St George's Bay Rd, Parnell. Captain Le Roy was one of the promoters of the City Rifles, a corps of Volunteers which he joined in 1857. He saw service with this group in the Waikato Wars and was awarded a long-service medal; after the Wars he was also given two grants of land on the Great Barrier Island, thus beginning the long connection of his family with that island. When the City Rifles was disbanded in 1868, Captain LeRoy joined the newly-formed Naval Brigade, starting again as a private but he became soon a lieutenant and in 1871, the Commandant, a rank

he continued to hold until 1889. After the "Russian scare" of the early eighties, Commandant Le Roy had the entire command of the six corps forming the Auckland Naval Division.

The Volunteer Movement in Auckland, with which Emilius Le Roy was connected for forty years, has had a history of ups and downs - great enthusiasm and many enlistments when there seemed to be a danger of war on the horizon, followed by a period of decay and lethargy when the crisis appeared to be over. During the Maori War period, militia service was compulsory for all men between 16 and 60 but the service was not efficient and was intensely disliked by the men. Dr Logan Campbell asked for a grant of £1000 to provide the first instalment of good arms and provided a prize of a good rifle and a silver vase, to be competed for annually by the marksmen. Enrolment for the City Rifles began early in 1858 and the men started drilling in the old Barrack Square in O'Rorke St. They had at first no uniform but belts and frogs were distributed that year and firearms in November. Captain Le Roy was on the first committee, which met to draw up the rules in August 1858 in the Oddfellows Hall, Queen St. George Fraser was the secretary. The first uniform was a blue serge shirt, with a cloth cap and black belt, but in 1860 a blue tunic replaced the serge shirt. Members bought their own uniforms and paid for their own ammunition for target practice, also they had to pay an entrance fee of 1/- and a sub of 1/- a month and were fined 1/- for absence from drill without excuse. The Drill instructor was paid £2 a month and the Bugler 15/-. During the 1863 War the Volunteers were mainly on garrison duty; serving at the Galloway Redoubt Wairoa; they also formed a Flying Column for work in the bush. Charles Heaphy, who gained a V.C. in 1867, was an original member of the City Rifles.

Commandant Le Roy was probably happier with his Naval Division than with the City Rifles. Every year he used to take the Naval Cadets for a period to the Great Barrier Island for training in seamanship. His Naval Reserves were extremely smart and always accompanied the Governor on Parades; he was present in all his best uniform and decorations on all special occasions such as the Queen's Jubilee and the unveiling of the Statue in Albert Park. His sail and tent-making business prospered and at periods would employ up to 100 men. He died in 1917, aged 90.

Our grateful thanks to Mr A.E. Le Roy for all his valuable and little-known information on the early days of the Barrier.

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MR LE ROYS AUCKLAND BUSINESS

Many moves as the firm expanded

Emilius Le Roy started his sail-making and canvas goods business in 1852; early photos show his premises among the few along the foreshore, in Fort St, from where probably the heavy sails could be dropped into waiting boats at high tide. They carried on there for many years. My earliest recollection of the business was in Queen St almost opposite what is now Tyler St just below the present Post Office. It was in the second building above Quay St, over Rew's grocery and shipping supplies. The entrance was a wide passage to a stairway. (All these old buildings were removed a few years ago, to make way for large new ones and Q. Elizabeth Square.) They were there in 1890 and, I think, had been there for twenty years previously.

Through the 1890s an average of ten men were employed. The flag-making and light tents were then made in a small factory at the back of my grandfather's home in Parnell, where two and often three of his younger daughters worked with treadle machines. All work had been done by hand until the first heavy treadle machines were imported in the early 1890s. By 1896 the business was growing too large for the building and a move was made to 42 Queen St, where they obtained the whole use of the second and third floors facing Queen St of this then old building. This gave room for expansion; several gas engines were used for power and the first power machines were installed. At this time there was no electricity or telephones.

Many girls were now employed making the lighter tents, flags and canvas coats. By 1909 the force had increased to about 70 workers; the coming of electric power greatly assisted in the ease of work and the type of machines used. The heavy work sails requirements were decreasing but the canvas cover and horse-cover had increased greatly, so again work-room space became cramped.

About this time, the owners of the building wanted to pull it down, as well as the two buildings at the back facing Fort St Lane. In order to build a large new office block, with shops on to Queen St, and at the back, a picture theatre and three very large work-rooms. Le Roy' then occupied the three large new rooms and also a huge basement which ran under the shops and offices, their own factory and the picture theatre. This meant there was plenty of space for storage of stock and for the despatch and hire department, the three floors above giving ample room for the making of canvas coats, light tents and flags, with the heavy canvas work on the top floor. Staff soon increased to over a hundred.



The fourth home of Le Roy's in Queen St next to Samuel. Vaile's Land Agency.

Early in 1914, many thousands of canvas bales arrived from Scotland. Somehow the orders had been duplicated. The storage of these caused a problem but, at the outbreak of the war, this huge stock enabled Le Roy's to equip all the New Zealand forces with Bell tents, Mess tents, Kit-bags and horse nose-bags. In order to get all these made in time, most of the men worked seven days a week, sleeping for only a few hours among the tents, hot meals being brought in to the work-rooms. Had this large un-ordered stock not been on hand, the N.Z. Forces leaving the country could not have been fully equipped, as little other stock was then in the country.

During 1920, Le Roy's sold the wholesale manufacture of canvas coats and horse-covers with a new factory being built in Sale St Freeman's Bay, to Ross and Glendening; then Le Roy's bought the building on the other side of Queen St,

where the Bank of New South Wales is now. This building was altered, giving two shops on Queen St, with office and workroom above, and the despatch departments at the back of the building, with an entrance to Mills Lane.

When the move was made, Ross and Glendening took half the factory staff to Sale St and the rest moved to the re-designed building on the other side of Queen St. Here soon the factory space was too small, so a new factory was built in Union St and much of the work was done there.

My uncle had lost his only son in the 1914 War and had no one else to take over the business; my father, who had always been in charge of the manufacturing part, and my uncle were by 1930 well past retiring age and decided to give up; the business was formed into a company and a manager appointed, being given shares in the firm. It was run like this for a number of years and then sold. It was sad to see no one of the Le Roy's left to carry on, as the business had become a part of Auckland, having been situated for over 80 years near the busy part of Queen St and so well known to all the inhabitants.

The Ancient Trade of Sail-making

by E. A. Le Roy

Two of Captain Le Roy's sons were taught their father's trade but they did not always carry on in the business; his grandson was also taught the same skill and had some practice at it but he also took up other work in later years. He remembers however, something of the old sail-loft and its atmosphere and he has written this descriptive piece: As one entered a sail loft in years gone by, there was always a pleasant smell, one quite distinctive which one seems to remember all one's life. It came from the vegetable tar and wax mixtures used on the Italian hemp ropes and the twine used in sail-making. The rope came all ready treated and the twine was treated in the sail-loft. The recipe for treating the twine was a secret but I know that vegetable tar from Stockholm was mixed with beeswax and a little thinners. This was heated but never allowed to boil and the twine was passed through this hot liquid. All the thread was wound by hand and it was always the apprentice boys' job to ball the hot twine. It was a slow, hot and tiresome job, which sometimes

went on for two days. The twine was of different thicknesses and rolled into balls of about a pound in weight.

The first thread for machines for the heavy sails came on large wooden reels and it was often very uneven, causing much trouble; this thread also ran through a mixture of tar which originally had to be kept heated. Early in the 1900s, a much better thread was available in one-pound spools; the heavy zig-zag machines then used would take only up to a 3 ply thread and the heavier straight sewing machines used five-ply on horse-covers and other heavy canvas work. The machine thread came with a reverse twist to that used for all hand work, so that a thread used for hand sewing was not used on a machine and a machine thread was not used for hand work. All this extra care had to be taken so that the right thread was used and the rope properly treated, as the life of the sails depended so much on them. As the thread and rope took longer to dry than the canvas, the treatment prevented decay in the stitching. Had synthetic materials been available in sailing vessels days, how much easier it would have been for the sailmaker, and for the sailor when drying the sails.

The sail-maker's work bench - a long stool with wooden legs - was the same type used all over the world and aboard all sailing ships. The pattern had been the same for hundreds of years.

At Le Roy's, they found that kauri timber made an excellent work bench. They were about 14 or 15 inches high and about the same width, with the wooden legs well splayed. The right hand end of the top was recessed or had a low partition for needles, wax, fid holes, places for brass thimbles or small items needed - a hook on a short piece of rope to hold the material while working and at the end, a place for the twine being used. On the back of the bench was a long canvas bag in which was kept a wooden mallet and fid board. This was made out of timber that would not split - it was about 2" thick, 18" x 12", with holes of various sizes. You spread your knees apart and held the board between them, the worked hole on the sail was placed over the right-sized hole in the board and a tapering bone or hardwood fid driven through by the mallet, stretching it and then inserting a brass thimble; it would

then tighten over and hold the thimble. This gave smooth passage for the rope passing through.

By the time I went through the trade in the early years of this century, thread had improved and the treating of thread had stopped, only beeswax was used on each needleful. Our palmer as made chiefly of leather, used to force the needle through the material. Le Roy's had always had these specially made in London padded below the steel piece to take the pressure of the needle, the roping palms extending well up the thumb so that the twine twisted around this, to allow the stitches to be drawn very tight. All older sailmakers' fingers seemed to develop great strength in the right hand; old sailmakers, to show this, would hold a three-foot one-piece rule right at one end, held on the back of the fore and third fingers, with the large finger over to hold it on. The leverage was far beyond an average man's strength but most real old sailmakers would do this and hold it extended for one minute. I could never do this but machines had by this time taken over much of the work and steam had almost replaced the sailing vessels, so less time was spent on hand work.

For many years Le Roy's was the only firm of sailmakers in Auckland; many of the firms later in business had worked, or their foreman had worked, at Le Roy's for years. When John Bums started in sails and covers, their foreman was from Le Roy's. I think, when they gave up sails and covers, the firm which took over is still going under another name. The original owner of Jeune's in Gisborne worked at Le Roy's over 80 years ago and I did know of several others, but cannot remember the names.

*A Ford delivery van of Le Roys about 1920
Photo supplied by the Le Roy family*

