

Dec 1970

PRE-SCHOOL PIONEER

**Helen Downer brought
kindergartens to the
Bay of Plenty**

MENTION the name of Helen Downer in Rotorua, and watch faces light up.

People will proudly talk about the Helen Downer Free Kindergarten, and of the fact that Mrs Downer was invested with the MBE in 1961 for her services to the community.

This woman of rare dignity, kindly spirit and gentle wit, has endeared herself to young and old with untiring concern and work for the mothers and children of the Bay of Plenty.

In 1937 she came from Auckland to join the staff of Rotorua High School . . . she stayed to marry, and later, play an important role in the city's development.

"My interest in the Kindergarten movement grew through seeing so many of my pupils

showing a particular aptitude for pre-school teaching. That's why I convened the first meeting in November, 1950, to test public attitudes."

A few months later the first free kindergarten in the Bay of Plenty was established.

The need for similar facilities soon became evident in other Bay of Plenty towns, and Mrs Downer assisted with their estab-

lishment.

In 1960, the three associations in the area amalgamated to form the Bay of Plenty Free Kindergarten Association, with Mrs Downer as president. "Now we have 19 kindergartens. The 20th is under construction at Brookfield, Tauranga," she said.

Elected National President of the New Zealand Free Kindergarten Union in 1957, Mrs Down-

er held office until she retired in 1966.

The six kindergartens in Rotorua were doing invaluable work with Maori children, instilling confidence and language ability before they started primary school, said Mrs Downer.

She is now widowed, and living alone . . . but finds life "too busy for boredom."

—CASSIE RUSSELL



Mrs Helen Downer chats with children during one of her regular visits to a Rotorua kindergarten.