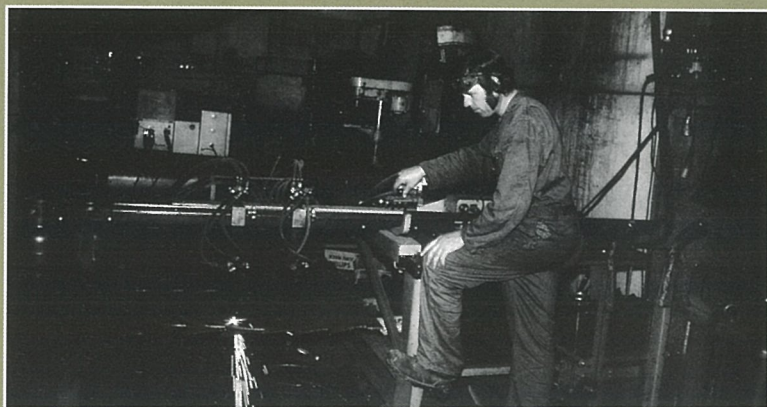


Northern Lights – Those “bastards” from Auckland

“DON’T YOU BASTARDS EVER SLEEP?”

That’s the trouble with building trailers in New Zealand’s largest city; generally you have neighbours. Neighbours like to sleep; trailer builders like to build trailers until the job is done. That’s the way it was done in the old days, anyway.

That’s the way Victor Couwenbergh did it. He started building trailers out back of his home in Mount Roskill, which didn’t make him at all popular with his neighbours. It got worse when he set up a general engineering and fabrication business doing work for an old mate, Neville Roberts. It was while working at



Victor Couwenbergh - profile cutting - 1968.

Neville’s shed in the middle of the night that, according to Vic, “Neighbours used to jump through the hedge screaming and yelling at us, ‘Don’t you bastards ever go to sleep?’ But we had to work, you know?”

And work he did. Victor Couwenbergh retired recently as managing director of Transmech Limited (formerly Equipment Fabricators) after close to half a century building truck bodies and trailers in Auckland. In that time, he got to know most of his contemporaries personally. He knew Jack Tidd (“a good bloke and a bit of a fossicker”), Bill Walker (“huge trailer builder and a bugger to compete with”). At the time the manager of Steelbro (“came up here and told me he would run me out of business”). He’s also seen the best and the worst in trailer building and has strong comments to make about the shoddy work he’s seen and still sees.

In his time, he’s built just about everything. And if there was something he didn’t build, such as curtainsiders, that mantle and responsibility has been taken up by his son, Anthony Couwenbergh and Tony Cook, who now run their own manufacturing business (Transmech New Zealand Limited) from the same site as the old company in Mangere’s Airport Oaks.¹

Victor’s first trailer, the neighbour-riling Mount Roskill effort, was a two-axle tipper with a fixed drawbar, built for Brian Stuart who wanted it to cart fertiliser from Auckland to Riverhead. That’s not a particularly arduous journey or load for a trailer, so



¹ The old company was originally owned by Vic and his wife, and later also by their two sons Anthony and Carl. Carl later left the business and now works outside the industry.

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Victor's workshop in Mt Wellington - 1969.

Brian was of the opinion that he could save a bit on component cost. And what he could save on most was running gear.

Be warned: just about every trailer builder has a similar horror story to tell. Here's Vic's in his own words:

"Brian said to me, how much are these axles? And I told him. He said, 'I can get them much cheaper.'

"I said 'Well if you can, go for it.' Sure enough, he turns up with a couple of axles that I duly fitted, and the trailer went on the road.

"The first day that he put a load on it he rang me up. He said, 'There's something wrong with my axles. I said to him, 'Well it doesn't really surprise me, 'cause I know what you paid for them.' He'd got them off a chap called Darkie, a truck wrecker at the time.

"Anyway, I went and had a look and, bugger me, if the axles



Victor with son Anthony & his business partner Tony Cook.

were actually bending. We put a jack under the trailer and jacked it up to see what was going on, but the trailer was loaded and the jack just went into the axle.

"It turned out that this axle was made by joining the two stub ends with a thin weld-tube and passing a piece of round through the middle, through the hollow part, something like two-inch round or something like that, and that was welded up and ground off into the end. And they were supposed to be solid ends.

"That sort of thing used to go on a lot."

But Vic also remembers another story from personal experience; this one had the shoe on the other foot. This time the trailer buyer, not the builder, knew what was wanted.

Vic and the Reg Jackson drawbar episode:

"I used to be quite cocky about things. And when I built something, I often boasted that you're never going to break this. "But sometimes you get shown up." Reg Jackson was working in the forestry carting logs.

Well, they get into some pretty tight places with their trailers, and he kept breaking his drawbars. So, I built him one. And I said to him, "Well you're not going to bend this one mate." He just grinned. He brought it back a few days later, bent like a banana. So I had to stiffen it up even more. "He didn't manage to bend it after that." There is pride there. Pride in workmanship. And Vic is today proud of his 40-odd years in the business. Proud also of the way his son Anthony in partnership with Tony Cook, has continued in the industry. But we also get the feeling while talking to Vic that he doesn't want to entirely let go. He still turns up at the Airport Oaks Plant in Mangere wearing his overalls, ready to work. He can still be found at the drawing board designing trailers-as a matter of interest; Victor Couwenbergh is still renowned for the quality and intricacy of his drawing-plans. He is still one of the best draughtsmen around. It is, in fact, a tribute to Victor Couwenbergh, that he receives such acclaim. It is hard to make your mark when buried in the midst of New Zealand's largest city. It is easier outside in the acknowledged production centres of trailer building such as Feilding, Rotorua and Hamilton. And, of course, Aucklanders had to contend with those bloody neighbours.

That may account for why some of Auckland's most prominent trailer builders of the past and today either originated or were given their start outside of


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Northern Lights
– Those “Bastards”
from Auckland



Brian McDonald, Fairfax Industries

Auckland. We think here of Tapper Transport Engineering—coming down from up north; Fairfax Industries—connected with Dometts from Feilding, and Transfleet Equipment—also influenced by Dometts.

However, one of our larger yet least known trailer builders of the past was Auckland-based. Teil Trailers produced a quality line of production, as well as made-to-order trailers. But in the context of this book, which is mainly about the people rather than the companies that built trailers, there are sadly few stories coming from the Teil times that would command our attention. However, Teil’s giant contribution to the trailer building industry is secure, and their indelible place within the industry’s history is here acknowledged and recorded.

More fertile ground for an Auckland anecdote, a yarn and, quite

probably a tall story, can be found with two old mates and erstwhile colleagues now heading the fore-mentioned Fairfax Industries Ltd and Transfleet Equipment Ltd: respectively, Brian McDonald and Dave Gillies.

Brian McDonald’s Fairfax Industries came under his ownership in 1973 making more fiberglass truck and trailer bodies, ambulances, services vehicles, refrigerated rail containers and luxury coaches than anybody else in New Zealand.

The history of Fairfax Industries is tied, indelibly, to its primary production method, Glass Reinforced Plastics (GRP).

In the late 60s, Mason Bros had the licence from Reinforced Plastics in Australia to build insulated truck bodies and trailers in New Zealand. Local customers included RFL (Refrigerated Freight Lines) and Birdseye.² But that was also at the stage that Mason Bros had a lot of engineering and union problems. The company went through a divestment process, and the insulated body business was thrown out to pasture—literally. The moulds were thrown on to the grass out back. However, a young engineer called Geoff King, who had been seconded to run the process there, met a local called Roy Burton, and the two, with two others, bought the moulds and restarted the process—out of Fairfax Avenue in Penrose.

Meanwhile, **Brian McDonald** was looking for new opportunities. Brian, born and raised in Howick, is a trained motor mechanic. He moved from there to selling trucks for Panmure Motors and later trailers for Dometts.

While at Dometts, Brian was busy making and selling steel chassis to Fairfax Industries for them to put their moulded bodies on. In the early 70s, he won an Institute of Road Engineers’ trip to the Sydney Truck Show. Part of that trip included a visit to

² They operated out of a building in Grayson Avenue Papatoetoe, now occupied by William Gill & Sons Ltd. The building, even today, has a particularly high stud to accommodate truck bodies.



The first 13m dry goods monocoque semi-built by Fairfax.

Northern Lights – Those “Bastards” from Auckland

³Brian reckons that they were both drunk that night. That may be the case (or not), but Bob could at least remember the conversation. He rang Brian the next day to ask if he was “for real” with his refrigerated fibreglass idea.

⁴The company name was changed soon after from Fairfax Fibreglass to Fairfax Industries, to reflect a greater emphasis on road transport engineers that just happened to be using fibreglass. “Fairfax” was retained because it was so ingrained; and, in any case, Brian liked to tell people that the entire Fairfax Avenue was named after his company.

⁵ That was the site originally found for Dometts by Leo Faulkner and built up by Neil Peterken (see page 70). Fairfax Industries would eventually take over that site as well.

Fridgemobile, then one of Australia’s largest refrigerated transport operations. That company’s dominance in and dependence on fibreglass trailers impressed Brian, particularly after someone turned to him and said, “That’s the way to go, Brian.”

Brian agreed. Then forgot about it.

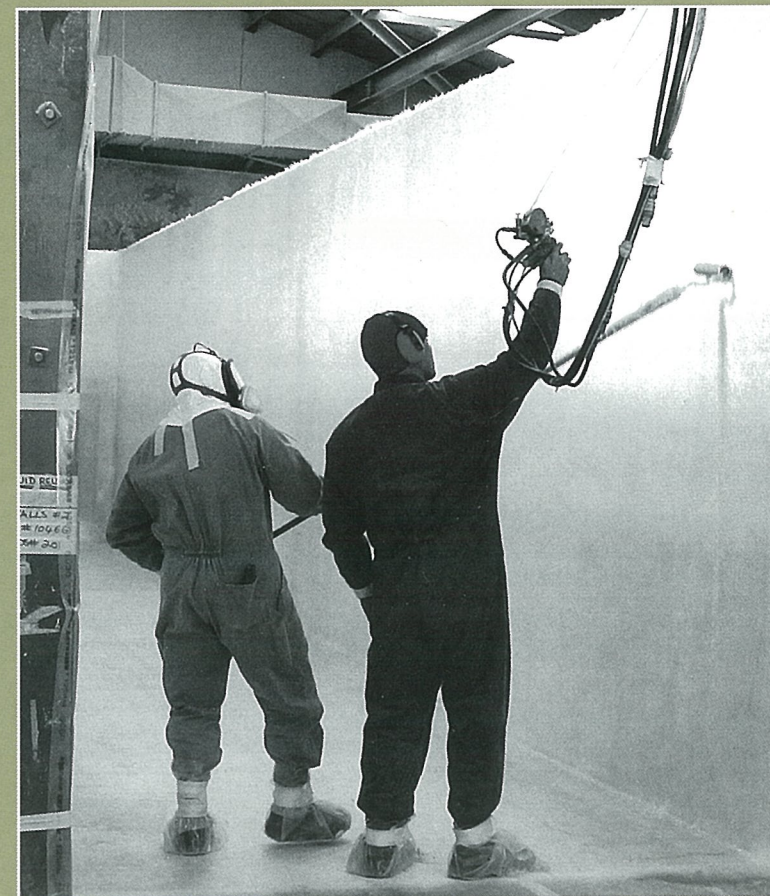
One of Brian’s friends was an accountant. Over the years and a few beers, they two had talked about getting their skills together (“his accounting skills and my bullshit”) and building a company. One night at a birthday, he and Bob Dorling, the accountant, had such a discussion, and Brian raised the idea of fibreglass bodies for refrigeration.³

A few enquiries over the weeks that followed revealed that there was nothing of that sort then manufactured in New Zealand. The closest was Fairfax Fibreglass and their fibreglass bodies.

Brian and Bob decided to put in a bid for that company. Not that they had any money. But the then-managers of Fairfax Fibreglass thought that Brian was bidding on behalf of Dometts, and that implied money to back the bid. In 1975, right on Christmas, his bid for \$30,000 was accepted. Brian and Bob made a quick visit to their respective banks. They came out with a Christmas gift: \$15,000 mortgages on their homes, and a new company.⁴

Soon after he took control, Brian brought to his new company a licence agreement with Reinforced Plastics in Melbourne. He also brought with him a string of customers and credibility built up after years as being seen as a straight shooter at Dometts.

That credibility was important, because fibreglass process had virtually none in the transport business. The sole exposure to fibreglass that many transport operators they were trying to sell to in those days had, was the gel they had



Fairfax makes more fibreglass bodied trailers than anybody else.

on their boats—which cracked!

However, some had faith—in Brian, if not yet the process. The first trailer work from Fairfax Industries largely comprised 7.3 metre (the size of the biggest mould at the time) semis for RFL, and started exporting to Hong Kong. Dometts supplied the steel chassis, and running gear.

The company outgrew its workshop at Fairfax Avenue. With the

help of a Development Finance Corporation loan, they shifted in 1977 to Takanini premises shared with their biggest supplier, Dometts—then managed by Dave Gillies, who had returned from the Tauranga branch.⁵

Soon after, Dave and Dometts decided to move and build a new Factory at Wiri. Dave moved out, and Brian moved in to the full site in Takanini.

With the respective moves came a change of emphasis and manufacturing process for Fairfax Industries. Steel chassis from Dometts were out; monocoque fibreglass construction was in.

The company built the first 13-metre dry goods monocoque semi in this part of the world. The Australians said it couldn't be done, and they were nearly right. The 13-metre length was double that of the largest Fairfax moulds of the time. Brian, logically, just moulded the trailer in two pieces and welded them together. It did work, and the tailer, built for Waikato Milk, is still in operation for NZ Milk Corporation.

We will return to the marvellous monocoques in the next chapter. But it is time now to move across the way to another Auckland trailer builder who was soon to start working with another relatively new process.

Time to bring in **Dave Gillies** and his work with aluminium.

We start, as we did with Brian, at Mason Bros. Dave started there as an apprentice draughtsman in 1960. At that time, the company was a large, multifaceted heavy engineering plant. Production included steam boilers, overhead cranes, barges, dredges and silos. They had a machine shop and fabrication plant in Mt Wellington, and a shipbuilding plant and slipway in Beaumont Street in the city. Because of the variety of work, Dave says it was a great place to learn.

A RECORD(ED) TURNOVER

Dave Gillies and the writer of this book met at a very early stage in our respective careers. One day in the early 70s, we were both in Rotorua to watch Warren Mitchell (Alf Garnett of *Till Death Do Us Part*) help launch Leyland's Crusader range of trucks. That meeting has not until now been recorded, but what happened after has.

Dave Gillies:

"While driving home from Rotorua to Mount Maunganui that night in my Hillman Hunter, I swerved to miss a possum or rabbit, and slid into the water table next to a then new overbridge outside the Rangiora Meatworks at Te Puke. I thought I had things under control, but then my left wheel hit a protruding concrete stormwater pipe and the car flipped. The interesting thing was that at the first impact my memo recorder started up and recorded the rollover sequence, the window glass breaking, the car coming to a rest and...my swearing. I tended to treat the incident lightly because I got away with only minor bruising, but for years I played that recording to industry folk. Unfortunately, one day I mistakenly taped over the recording and it's now lost. But it was quite a talking point at the time."



A late model Winstone Trailer built by Transfleet.



Transfleet's first trailer outside their Manukau premises

And he did.

At the completion of his apprenticeship in 1965, Dave concentrated on drawing work for the sales department and eventually moved into a sales engineer's position. His first job in that capacity was selling Hartley Sewage systems. He also became involved with FRP refrigerated bodies, built under licence to FRP Australia—the part of the business on-sold to Fairfax Fibreglass, and then of course on to Brian McDonald.⁶ The two—Dave Gillies and Brian McDonald—would cross paths many times, as we will see.

But by far the largest part of Dave's work for Masons was in bulk handling equipment. Masons were pioneers in pneumatic handling of dry powdered granulated materials. The main

application was for cement and flour. Masons would fabricate the spherical tanks and subcontract the running gear to Dometts (again, Brian, at the time). Final piping and finishing work would be done at Masons.

It was a relatively new process, and Dave had to work hard to sell it to the industry. He recalls one memorable occasion when flour turned to custard. Dave Gillies:

"We built a portable tank and equipment so that we could do on-site demonstrations of the process. One day, we transported the whole lot and set it up in Cambridge Transport's yard. . To make the demonstration a little easier, we used a PVC discharge pipe, which my colleague was holding and using to direct the outflow into a bin.

⁶ Given that Mason Bros were never trailer builders, they seem to crop up in this book with remarkable frequency. There is their connection with Brian McDonald, and their employing of Dave Gillies. But they also gave a start to another doyen of the industry, Dan Lambert of Freightways fame, and it's believed that Manu Tuanui may have worked at Masons for a time after Rotorua.

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Davie Gillies (2nd from right) pictured with Brian McDonald, Laurie Williamson, Des Graham - 1989,

“All of a sudden there was a large crack, and I saw my colleague being thrown into the air. But I had my own problems. My hand was whipped off the discharge control valve. At that point, no one was in control, and grain was being blown everywhere, but mainly over the customer. What happened, of course, was that the grain particles had built up an electro-static charge in the PVC pipe, which eventually dissipated to earth through my colleague and myself.

“We never made that mistake again, and used an aluminium pipe instead of PVC plastic for future demos.”

Aluminium or plastic? It would be the first time he and Brian McDonald would diverge on their respective paths, and a precursor for what was to come.

Soon after that episode, in 1968, Dave Gillies became a sales representative for Dometts, assisting Leo Faulkner.

In 1970, he was given the responsibility of starting the company's new workshop at Mt Maunganui. However, that was also about the time that Neil Peterken left Dometts in Auckland to join Mills Engineering in Rotorua, so Dave was to hang on for eighteen months doing engineering in Auckland. Eventually he left for the Mount, and Brian McDonald was employed to cover Domett sales in Auckland.

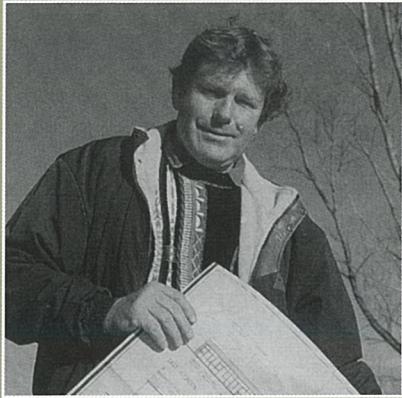
From the Mount, he covered sales of new trailers for the (by then) Fruehauf plant in Feilding, as well as modifications, truck fitments, and also the manufacture of log trailers and tipping equipment.

He spent seven years building the Domett business in the Bay of Plenty.

By 1977, Dave was back in Auckland with a company called Domett Fruehauf Trailers Auckland Ltd, in which he had a shareholding. That company would eventually inherit all Domett operations in Auckland.

In 1980, Dave Gillies would inherit them as well. He and his wife, Margaret, established Transfleet Equipment Ltd and purchased the balance of assets held by Domett Fruehauf Trailers Auckland Ltd. The Domett presence in Auckland, extant since the late 60s and nurturing ground for such luminaries as Dave himself, Brian McDonald, Leo Faulkner and Neil Peterken, was at an end.

In the years since, Dave and Margaret Gillies and their team at Transfleet Equipment Ltd have specialised in bulk haulage equipment, especially aluminium dump bodies in which they are second only to Ian and Bill's Transport & General in market share. Where Transfleet has excelled is in innovation, and like the Russel Laws and Ernie Binns, Dave acknowledges the significant contribution of their Engineering manager, Mike Eccles. Examples of that innovation include the establishment in New Zealand of



*Garry Banks,
Maxi-Trans.*

the Hallco live floor conveyor system, the “Big Smoothy”, a one piece side panel and floor corner body construction method, the high-volume interlocking side panel body design and, at a very early stage, the first round front corners on their aluminium dumpers so as to improve aerodynamics. Aluminium is the company’s strength, and there remains today some good-natured ribbing between Dave and Brian over the relative strengths and durability of their respective speciality materials—though, of course, the two companies rarely compete in the same market. But there is no doubt that Dave Gillies, aluminium and Transfleet are strong and durable. Dave can look back on 35 years in the trailer business and still going; aluminium speaks for itself—established and proven. And Transfleet? Well, there is another Gillies—sales and marketing manager Matthew—to take over one day and continue the Transfleet legacy and the remarkable run of family dynasties in the New Zealand truck-trailer manufacturing industry.

Of course these weren’t the only trailer builders in Auckland. Far from it. We have already mentioned Teil, and in and earlier



*Neil Boys,
Tanker Engineer.*

chapter we talked of Hamelex. Tappers we covered in depth. Companies today such as Opinion Holdings and Maxitrans are professionally managed and making major contributions to New Zealand truck-trailer building. Neil Boys’s Tanker Engineering has captured a lion’s share of tanker manufacturing—much of it taken from the centre of tanker manufacturing, Hamilton.

To be honest, there are perhaps not the “personalities” in Auckland that we find so dominate in our historical accounts of Rotorua, Hamilton and Feilding. There are no giants like Dave Domett, Jack Tidd or Mills and Manu.

But, before anyone takes this as (another) opportunity to slag off at Auckland, we need to remember that Aucklanders— trailer builders included— are pretty retiring people: quiet, studious, and not given to blowing their own horns.

After all, they wouldn’t want to disturb the neighbours.