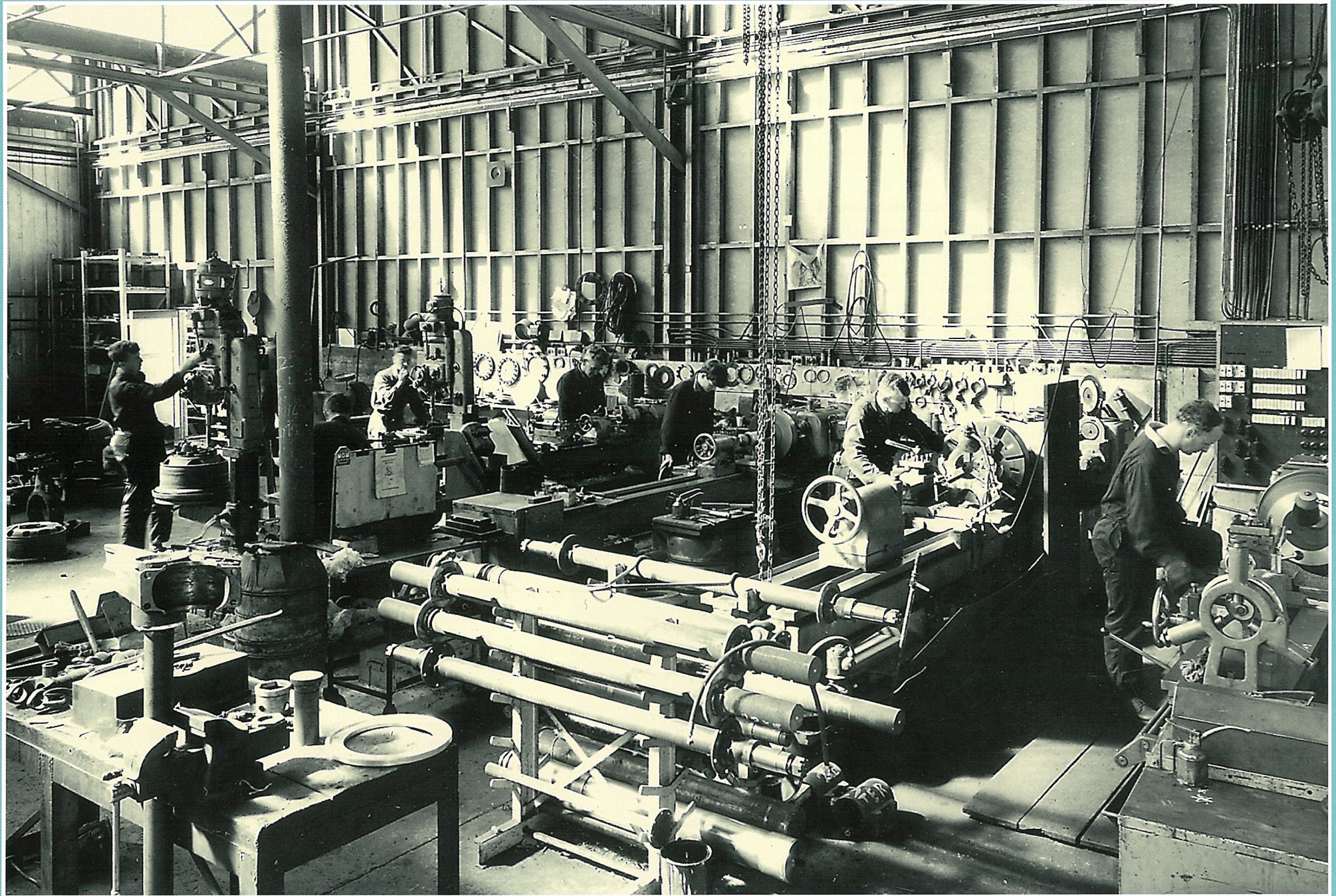


## CHAPTER 6





# In the Wake of Walker — Hot Times in Hamilton

THE WAR WAS GOOD for trailer building in Hamilton. It produced Jack Tidd, for a start. And he was good for trailer building because of the job he gave to Ernie Binns, because of developing the spectacularly successful Todd jinker, because of his innovative use of rubber bushes, and because he exemplified the “make something from nothing” approach that still permeates the industry today. And, most of all, he was good for the industry because of the company he gave us—TRT-Tidd Ross Todd.

Of course, he wasn't alone. Far from it. Indeed, many see the driving force of TRT, and certainly its growth force, vested elsewhere—in Jack's three fellow founding partners Dave Carden, Norm Todd and Jim Ross.

It's a fair summation. Jack, though full of enthusiasm and entrepreneurial to the last, was by the 60s weaning himself off hands-on involvement in trailer building. But his formation of Jack Tidd-Ross Todd limited in March 1967 is the last, largest and the most insightful of his contributions to our trailer building industry.

That company—the forerunner to TRT as we know it today—was an amalgam of Jack Tidd and Co. of Hamilton and Ross Todd Motors of Cambridge.

TELEPHONES  
Depot . . . . . 8001 D  
Foreman's Residence 8001 K  
Managing Director  
Mr. Trevor Doidge 7394

**T. DOIDGE LTD.** *Logging Cartage Contractors*

AMISFIELD TOKOROA  
P.O. BOX 145

26th January, 1962.

Jack Tidd & Co. Ltd.,  
Great South Road,  
Te Rapa,  
Hamilton.

Dear Sir,

We now operate 21 Tidd Tandem Logging Trailers, and find them most adaptable and suitable for all logging operations, they have proved most reliable and have done big mileages with very little maintenance.

The first original four tandem trailers we purchased have done a total of 750,000 miles, and we have only spent £49 - 18 - 6 in replacement parts over this period. No rubber bushes needed replacing.

We owe a lot of our success to using Tidd Logging Trailers, as they stay on the job doing big daily mileages with heavy loads, needing no attention and giving safe operation.

Yours faithfully,

*T. Doidge*  
.....

T. Doidge.  
Director.





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Ross Todd Motors, which still exists in Cambridge, had an interesting start. Two mates, Jim Ross and Norm Todd, recently demobbed from the Airforce, wanted to open a garage repair shop. Unfortunately, they didn't have the money to buy premises. Not a great start. But Jim Ross came up with the idea of putting the hard word on his cousin Jim Wallace to rent them some space in Wallace's cheese factory in Leamington. Wallace was in agreement, so the budding garage owners took off down



*Ross-Todd bought T Doidge Ltd in 1966 providing endless R&D opportunities.*

to Leamington to have a look at the new global headquarters of Ross Todd Motors. Norm remembers his first sight of it. Also the smell. Vividly:

“There was all this blood and bone and meat meal lying around. It stank like hell. So, we said to Jim Wallace ‘what are you going to do with all that?’ and he said he didn’t see the problem—he and his boys would stack up all the meat in one corner and we could have the rest.”

The boys did it tough for a start. But then they latched on to the idea of cutting down old cars and converting them into half-ton utilities and farm buggies. Just after the war, such vehicles, regardless of their origins, were worth their weight in gold. And soon the boys were on top of a thriving business supplying vehicles for the Karapiro Dam project and J.D. Wallace’s opening up of Mangakino district.

It got even better for the boys. Thanks to Jack Tidd and Ray Vincent, army-surplus equipment was flooding into the country. Rebuilds were big business and Norm and Jim would go on to build about 200 trucks.

But they were not always easy to do. Nor sometimes were they quite the panacea local operators were looking for to replace grossly underpowered tractor units. Norm Todd remembers one conversion that occurred soon after their 1954 move to a new workshop in Cambridge (still there as Ross Todd Motors today):

“(Transport) operators were getting greedy for bigger loads and quicker turn-around times. It was quicker and easier to fix the second rather than the first. For example, one of the first jobs we did after moving to Cambridge was the conversion of a 3-cylinder GM diesel into a Ford Thornton. It wasn’t easy, but we got it done. So, we then said to the bloke that the increased



horsepower would give him the faster turn-around, but we don't recommend his increasing the payload because of the existing drive train. Yeah, you guessed it—as soon as he is out of our yard, on comes another stock deck to his truck, plus a trailer on the back. You can't tell some blokes—then or now.”

Notwithstanding the headaches caused by such customers, the boys of Ross Todd Motors prospered.

In 1964, Ross Todd Motors moved to Cambridge. Their first workshop there was a ramshackle shed—so ramshackle that the local International Harvester manager, evaluating it as a possible IH dealership, famously characterised selling International Harvesters from there as like : “Selling chocolates out of a shithouse.”

Nevertheless, the boys got the dealership.

In 1966, they bought T Doige Ltd in Tokoroa. With it came 33 logging trucks, which they converted to GM diesels. Working on their own units enabled them to experiment—something they did successfully with rebuilds and development of spread axles for both trucks and trailers.

All this growth was drawing the attention of their erstwhile equipment supplier Jack Tidd. This may have diverted his attention from another character in Waikato—one who was in direct competition and causing him a few problems.

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**Dave Carden** served his apprenticeship as a fitter & turner at A & G Price in Thames. Well, served some of it, anyway. In those days, the late 40s, the full apprenticeship was 10,000 hours. Dave had done 8,000 when he decided he wanted to be self-employed, and for that he needed to add welding to his skills. To do that, he needed to move to a little engineering shop he knew in Putaruru. He made the request, which was promptly declined by his boss at A & G Price. “Okay”, says Dave, “I’ll



*Jim Ross (left) & Norman Todd (2nd from right) ‘cobblers’ in the airforce.*

wait until the apprenticeship commissioner comes down here, and he’ll make you give me a transfer.” So he did. And the commissioner came, saw, and was conquered by Carden. Within a week, Dave was learning welding in Putaruru.

Following a stint at sea as an engineer, Dave returned to Putaruru in 1958 and opened his own general engineering shop called Southside Motors and Engineering. For a time, he busied himself with conversions, repairs and general engineering—keeping his head down and keeping busy. He built a couple of trailers, mainly for customers who were impressed by his repair work on their trucks and trailers. But new trailers weren’t a big part of his business, or one that Dave Carden was particularly confident and competent in. He remembers a commissioning of a trailer going like this:

Customer: Dave, do you think you could build me a trailer?

Carden: Shit, yeah. No problem

Then, as Dave now freely admits, he would go away and ask himself, “How do I do this?”



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Perhaps fortunately for the early trailer owners, Dave's focus and skills moved elsewhere, to crane carriers. This put Dave Carden in direct competition with Jack Tidd.

At that time, in the early 60s, Jack Tidd had a thriving business assembling crane carriers using imported components—components purchased using an import license.

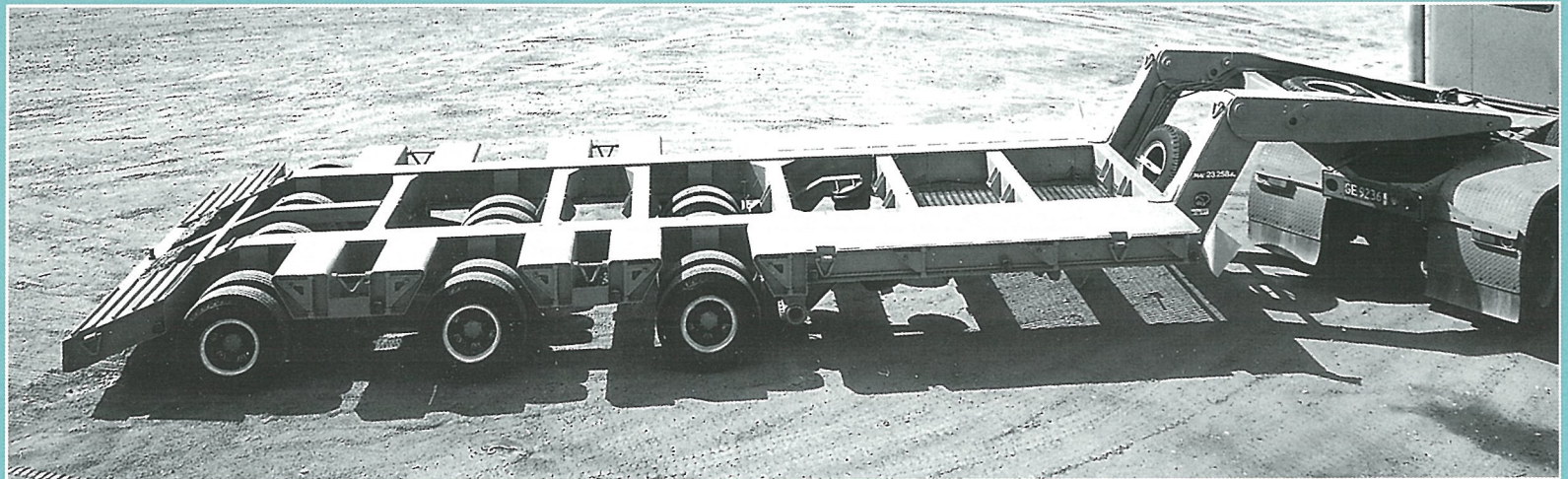
Dave Carden didn't have a license, but he did have ingenuity. This is the way Dave Carden remembers it today: "He (Jack) used to import all this army stuff and build his carriers that way. I couldn't do that. What I had to do was wait for a bloody logging truck to go over a cliff or something in the Kaimais. Then I would buy the truck, convert it into a carrier, then buy an excavator, which had the basic slewing structure of a crane, and then attach it to the carrier. I would build the boom, the luffing gear, the hooks, everything."

His number-eight-wire approach seemed to work for Dave.

Soon he was taking market share, and the man he was taking it off wasn't too happy. So, in the manner of empire builders since the dawn of time, Jack Tidd employed an old business adage of, "if you can't beat them, buy them."

He did that at the same time as his company, Jack Tidd and Co, merged with Norm Todd's and Jim Ross's Ross Todd Motors and Jim Ross's Baker Construction. Dave Carden brought his company Southside Motors and Engineering and its 20 staff into the mix, and JTTRT Jack Tidd-Ross Todd—general engineers, crane manufacturers, and trailer builders was born.

Jack and Dave had a third shareholding each, and Norm and Jim held the remaining third between them. Norm was appointed general manager, Dave workshop manager, and Jim was left to largely concentrate on his company, Baker Construction. Jack also appointed a professional director called Laurie Willis as chairman to look after his interests. But there was no doubt who the boss was or



*The TRT lowloader played an important role in the growth of the business.*









*From left: Bruce, Robert and Dave Carden*

#### **FOUR OF A KIND**

Three of their names will have a permanent place in the name of the company they founded. Dave Carden won't have that, but it is now his family that owns the company and through his sons, Bruce and Robert, manages it.

But what of the founders? What happened to them?

Well, Norm Todd retired as TRT's general manager in 1972 to go back to his roots and look after Ross Todd Motors; he is now retired and lives in Cambridge. Dave Carden, who took up the mantle of general manager when Norm retired, is also retired and leads something of an adventurous life—including trekking in Nepal!

Jim Ross's life ended in tragedy—a good bloke, well liked, well respected—he died in a car accident near Alexandra in 1981. He was a passenger in the vehicle.

As for Jack? Jack gave us a company in 1967 that lives on. It was, to some extent, his parting gift. He died in 1972 of cancer:

where the capital came from. That was very much Jack Tidd, who assumed something of an elder-statesman role in the company, and in the industry. He wielded his power with a firm hand.<sup>1</sup>

Jack was entrenched in his way of doing things. Too entrenched perhaps. He was also more an accomplished wheeler and dealer than he was an engineer. Engineering was never more than a hobby for Jack Tidd, and the justifiable and early reputation he had for innovation owes as much, if not more, to his design engineer Ernie Binns.

Ernie was gone, and so was a lot of Jack's flair. The newly merged company brought new excitement, renewed flair and added taste for innovation in the shape of Jim, Norm and Dave. And it brought arguments. Particularly between Jack and Dave. Jack's staple, the crane carrier, was a case in point: Jack's design was entrenched and unchanging; Dave's was constantly evolving, keeping ahead of the play. Jack's days as an innovator were numbered.

And not only with cranes. Some of his creations and contributions to the industry, such as the eponymous Tidd jinker, had also seen their day. The nature and requirements of the market were changing; so was the company.

Under the custodial care of Dave Carden, Norm Todd and Jim Ross, TRT Tidd Ross Todd, now colloquially known as TRT, began to capitalise on its strengths. Logging trailers were no longer one of them. But cranes, service vehicles and transporters—particularly transporters—were.

TRT, with its transporters—lowloaders—were indisputably in the right place at the right time. The Think Big projects of the late 70s created a huge market for locally produced trailers able to handle the giant earthmoving units. Tappers were doing a few in Auckland, but there weren't many other manufacturers in the



market. The boys of TRT saw the opportunity and went for it. But an early transporter build, which challenged them and earned TRT something of an international reputation (more on that later), had nothing to do with New Zealand's Think Big projects. It did, however, give the company a fast-track learning experience that it would later successfully develop into a "can do" reputation.

That job also reveals something of the inner-workings—the modus operandi—of TRT in the early days and today under the management of Dave Carden's sons Bruce and Robert. It's Dave who tells the story of the Bougainville Project...

"We had a bloke from Bougainville, New Guinea come to us with an order for a 100-ton low loader to carry a D10. Well, D10s had only just come out, and no bloody lowloader in the world at that time was big enough to handle them. That wasn't the worse of it. He then went on to say that because of the ground conditions up there, the lowloader had to have wheels about the height of a man's shoulder; otherwise all the big coolies would get jammed in there and destroy the trailer. He also wanted only three axles to carry those 100 tons. And that meant sitting the D10 right in the guts, which takes a bit of strength.

"So, I said to him, 'Why us?' And he told me he had a guy who used to work for us now working for him. That guy mentioned we had developed a rubber mounted walking beam suspension, which compensates each axle and keeps the same loads over the bumps, and it won't roll the load off.

"He was right; we had designed that and nobody else had it. But the problem was that nobody, including TRT, had the axles of the right width that could carry 30 tons. So we had to import wrong-width axles, extend the middle, and marry them all in.

"The bloke took a look at what we built: 'Right,' he said, 'I'll have two of them.'

"That's what we did in those days. Still do. We built something from nothing. In that case, a fancy lowloader to someone's spec that no one else would or could afford to do it.

It was a typical job."

Typical or not, it built for TRT a reputation as groundbreaking trailer builders. One they have maintained. Sure, the company emphasis may today be on transport equipment and spares—and they are one of the largest importers in the country—but they still have an international profile for lowloaders and specialist trailers, including some spectacular work with hydraulics to produce house-moving trailers that work "miracles".

Their premises at Te Rapa in Hamilton and at Mount Maunganui are a far cry from the tin sheds of Cambridge and Putaruru, forerunners of the TRT of today. There are no more Tidds, no more Ross, no more Todds in the business—ironic given the name—but there are still Cardens—Bruce and Robert, who run the business today, plus father Dave, and Norm Todd, who drops in occasionally to "keep an eye on things." But there is a legacy. A legacy left by four blokes who decided to give it a go and did—successfully.

There are a couple of blokes just down the road from TRT who haven't done too badly, either.

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The partnership between Ian Stevenson and Bill Box, founders of Transport & General Engineering Company Limited, is one of the most durable and resilient in the history of New Zealand truck-trailer manufacturing.

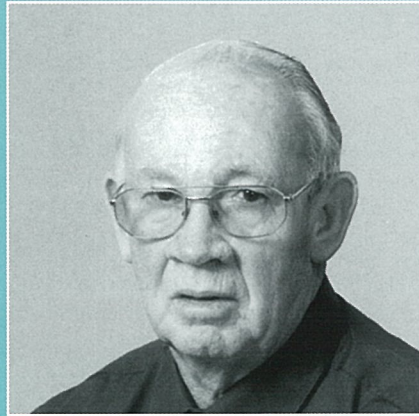
It's now almost half a century old, though, as Ian would say, "Who's counting?"

They formed their company in 1955, but their friendship goes back a lot further than that. It goes back to Bill Walker. Both

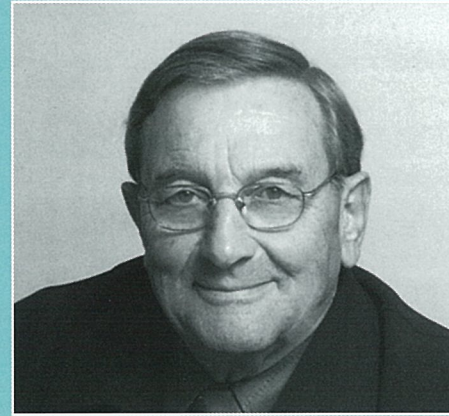
<sup>1</sup> This anecdote from Dave Carden illustrates that point. Remember in reading this that Dave, Jim and Norm were partners with Jack in the business. Yet, Jack clearly ascribed to 'a first among equals' approach, as the end of this story reveals. Dave: "One day Jack Tidd was overseas, and one of our valued customers blew up the motor in a crane carrier. We didn't have a motor in stock, but Jack did—in a big wooden case just sitting in his bulk store. Our prime objective was to get our customer underway, so we 'borrowed' Jack's engine, put the lid back on the box, and hoped to hell we could get another engine before he got back. We didn't. The first day back, Jack wandered over to the bulk store to have a yarn with our storeman Brian McAsey. At one point, while in full flight with one of his yarns, Jack leaned on the box which being empty, slid across the floor, sending Jack flying for real. The lid was soon off, and all hell broke loose. Norm Todd and I were at the bottom of the hit parade for one hell of a long time after that."



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*Bill Box*



*Ian Stevenson*



*Mike Stevenson*

served their apprenticeships as fitters and turners at W.P. Walker Ltd. Bill started his in 1948 or 49, and Ian in 1951 or 52.

It was for both their first job after leaving school.

They describe Bill Walker as a great bloke, and his workshop as great place to serve an apprenticeship. Bill (Box) got his ticket with W.P. Walker, but Ian still had six months to go on his when he and Bill decided to up and leave.

They were ambitious, and they wanted their own business. Ian must be one of the few men in any industry to start one while still an apprentice.

Their first workshop was a rented building in Kent Street, Frankton, just outside of Hamilton. For a start, they concentrated on general engineering, but within a year they landed their first order for a trailer: a single-axle semi for a kauri logger in the Coromandel called Jim Barry. The man who gave the boys the job was Bill Walker. It had been an amicable parting of the ways.

After that, Ian and Bill still took all the engineering work

they could get, but the trailer side of their business and their reputation as trailer builders were growing.

They put together a few logging trailers (Bob “Cabbage” Woolston recalls giving them one of their first orders) and a couple of lowloaders. But it was tilt-deck trailers that really made a name for them in the industry. They built dozens of them while at Kent Street, mainly for the Ministry of Works and the New Zealand Electricity Department.

Tilt-decks became the mainstay of their business.

In 1960, they moved their company from Frankton to Te Rapa and with the change of building came a change of focus. Gone was the general engineering, and in were trailers and truck bodies—“hundreds of them.”

But who’s counting?

In 1969 came yet another shift in emphasis. Ian and Bill began experimenting with aluminium. Their first aluminium truck and trailer bodies were built for Roose Industries in Mercer and





*Tilt decks were the main stay of Transport & General's business.*

used to cart metal.

Ian admits that they had misgivings about aluminium trailers. They were pioneering the technology, and a few transport operators (and more than a few trailer builders) told them an aluminium trailer wouldn't work—it would probably fall to bits.

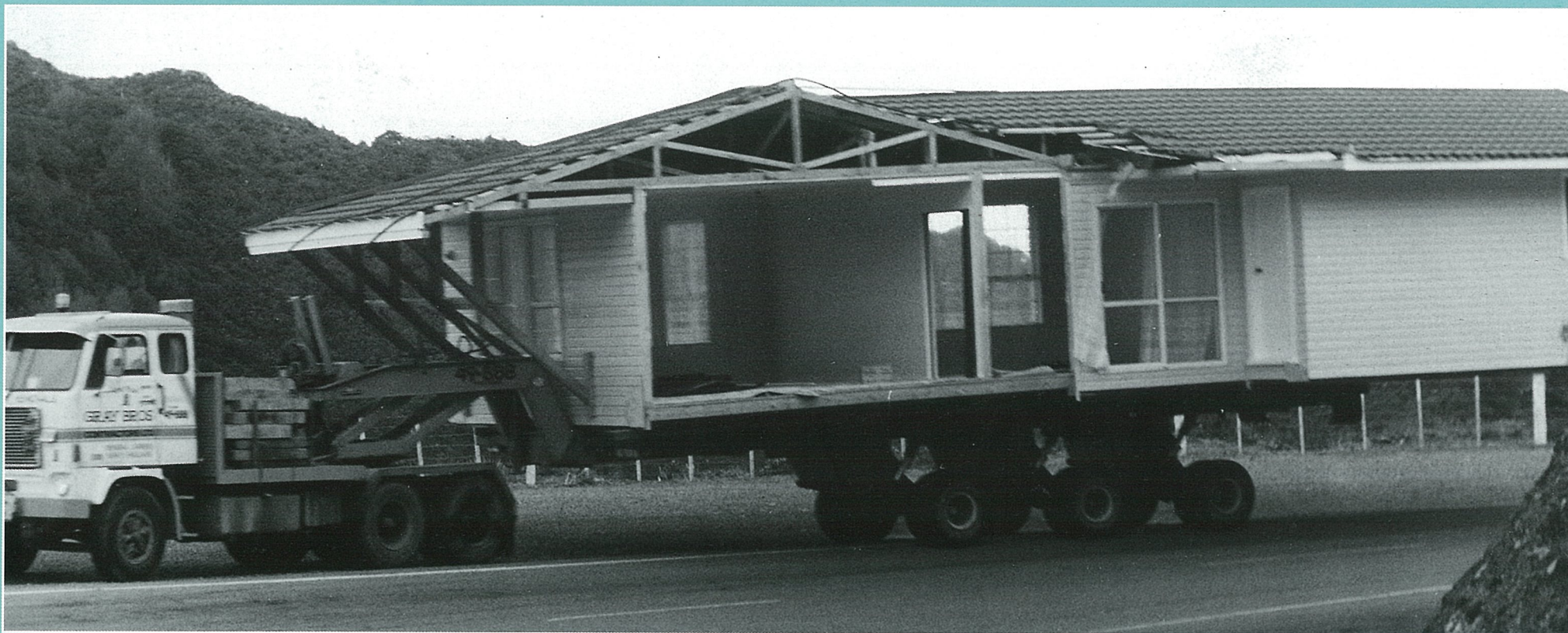
It didn't. So they persevered and built a second aluminium trailer a year after the first. Two years after that, in 1972, almost

their entire output was aluminium trailers, marketed under the Transport Trailer brand.

The building of aluminium trailers is now the staple business of Transport & General. Most are four-axle, and most are for New Zealand operators, though the company does send some to Australia.

The company is today acknowledged as New Zealand's largest manufacturer of heavy aluminium transport





*Grey Brothers commissioned Modern Transport Engineers to build their first house removal trailers.*

equipment. From 20,000 square feet of immaculate workshop space in Te Rapa, 32 staff in Te Rapa design, manufacture, repair and engineer—and do it well.

The operations side of the business is now run by Ian's son, Mike, as Transport & General's managing director, which allows Ian and Bill to spend more time relaxing and do doing what they do best—and always have—work in the workshop

A man who worked for Ian Stevenson and Bill Box and reckons

he “loved” every moment of it is Robin Ratcliffe, now managing director of Modern Transport and its parent company, Modern Transport Group. This was mainly because, as he puts it, “they gave me some transporters to build.”

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**Robin Ratcliffe** came to Transport & General for the same reason that governs much else in his life—then and now—a quest for knowledge.



He had done twelve months at Plastic Products learning method engineering. He was also at night classes studying for his NZ Certificate of Engineering. But what he wanted was hands-on experience. His new job at Transport & General as tradesman fitter-turner gave it to him.

He was put to work on transporters (lowloaders), designing them, planning them, and making them. The giants of the trailer world became his passion, and today they are much of the focus of his company.

But, he was restless. He wanted advancement within Transport & General, and when it didn't come to him, he started to look elsewhere.

His first look was at the Meat Research Institute. But they told him they only took on trainee engineers direct from school. That meant his night class training and hands-on experience at Transport & General would count for nothing.

So, a logical mind comes to the fore. If where you want to go is not available to you, and you don't want to stay where you are, you create your own opportunities—you start your own company, provided, as Robin puts it, “you have the balls to do it?”

Apparently he had, because he did start his own company.

He may have had the balls, but he didn't have the money or much else except a supportive wife, Colleen, and good mate in the contracting business, Ray Veitch. Robin and Ray formed a partnership doing general engineering. Three weeks into the new company, Harijan Singh, who had worked with Robin at Transport & General, joined them.

Their first major jobs were making concrete moulds for Perfectacrete Products during the day and repairing trucks at night. Perfectacrete Products which was owned by a young couple, Barry and Jan Thompson whose young son Kerry was



*Colleen and Robin Ratcliffe*

just a baby. The friendship flourished and today Kerry is the Manager of the MTE Groups parts company Mike's Transport Warehouse Ltd.

While Robin was serving his apprenticeship at Ajax Engineering he was taught by Gordon Smith, who would go on to be the Engineering manager at Readymix Concrete. Gordon heard that Robin was in business and gave him the opportunity to quote building twenty-seven curing block trollies. MTE's price was one third of the next competitor's price and so was given the first major contract, Readymix provided the much needed up front capital.

Readymix was obviously impressed by the completion and the quality. Within a year, they were back to Rob, Ray and Harijan with a request for a trailer.

It was 1974, and Robin Ratcliffe was back in the trailer business. Their first trailer for Readymix was a simple flat-deck used



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for carting concrete blocks. But it was obviously impressive, because it led to bigger things. Much bigger. Robin Ratcliffe takes up the story...

"The next thing was that Firth Concrete saw Readymix's trailer (this was their opposition) and said 'you made such a nice job of that, what about making two for us?' So we made two for them, and we thought we were the bees' knees. Then Readymix responded and said, 'Well, you can do pretty well anything; what about making us a tipping trailer?' So the next thing is we made a tipping trailer for Readymix. Then, it took off for us.

"A. F. Porter saw we made tipping trailers, and we were already repairing their motor scrapers and stuff like that, so they said well, why don't you do a couple for us? So we built a series of trailers for A F Porter.

"But my love was really lowloaders, and I couldn't really get into the lowloader market – couldn't break into it. We'd heard that there was a lowloader coming up in Te Awamutu for Russell Plant Hire, so I went across and tried to get the contract, but couldn't get my price anywhere near it. So, I'd heard that there was another couple of trailers coming up at Waikato Heavy Haulage."

George Scott is a generous bloke—a genuinely nice guy—well thought of in the Waikato. This story from Robin Ratcliffe illustrates why...

"I went across to George Scott (then heading up Waikato Heavy Haulage), and I gave him a price that he just couldn't resist. The price (\$8000) was virtually for the cost of the materials. We wanted to break into the lowloader market that bad, and I knew no one would be able to compete if we did it for the cost of the materials. With that, George arranged for us to get paid as soon as we'd finished the first one, and then straight away actually gave us the money for the second one as well! That just gave us

the lift we needed. It just flowed on from that."<sup>2</sup>

By 1980, Modern Transport Engineers was in full swing. Lowloaders were taking off, and the company was commissioned by Grey Brothers of Greytown to build house removal trailers. House removal trailers provide special challenges for the trailer builder, not the least of them being the hydraulic lifting mechanisms. For a while, Robin Ratcliffe couldn't get his head around them. One day they arrived unannounced at Modern Transport Engineers and dumped several bags "full of cash" on Robin's desk. In a manner more akin to the 'Offer You Can't Refuse' line from *The Godfather*, the Grey Brothers looked Robin right in the eye and said, "There, will that f\*\*king help you? Will that f\*\*king get you going?"

It did. Robin was on the phone to an engineering mate in Albany called John Wildy, and Modern Transport Engineering's first house removal trailer was on its way. Grey Brothers got their trailer ("a resounding success"), and we can assume that Rob kept his bags of cash.

After 1980, the company carried on building big trailers, including the biggest ever built in New Zealand (see side bar). But they also had the ability and the capacity to do things relatively small when required. For example, in 1980, they went back to the tilt-decks that Robin had worked on while at Transport & General and produced a "modernised" version, and they had and have a thriving business making bitumen trailers.

But "big is better" seems to be the attitude prevailing at Modern Transport Engineering's Te Rapa plant. In 1982, they added wing suspensions to their new generation of house removal trailers; in 1998 they produced the first platform transporters, and from as early as 1981, they had made and maintained an international name for themselves by producing the giants of

<sup>2</sup> Robin pays tribute to George's generosity in Modern Transport's website <http://www.modtrans.co.nz/>. Within ten years of its build, that first \$8000 trailer for Waikato Heavy Haulage was traded back by Modern Transport Engineers for \$30,000.



the trailer world—the spectacular rows-of-eights.

“Spectacular” could also be the word to describe the growth of the company itself. Today, Modern Transport Group comprises, as well as Modern Transport Engineers, a lease company, a maintenance company and a parts warehouse. Two sons of Robin and Colleen, Michael and Zane, are in the company; Colleen is its company secretary.

As for Robin? “Spectacular” hardly does justice to his range of interests: physics, mathematics, circuses (yes, they are the Ratcliffes of circus fame), and building show-rides, the esoteric, and—perhaps bordering on the bizarre—he’s owned an elephant and even brought up a couple of lions in his home.

As if that isn’t enough, this extraordinary builder of extraordinary trailers is a recorder-holder of sorts. Robin Ratcliffe holds the record for the shortest time anyone was ever employed by Bill Walker—15 minutes.

Of course, Robin could say that just persuaded him to go on to bigger and better things, first with Transport and General and then with his own company.

Maybe so.

If so, that is yet another thing to thank Bill Walker for.

## THE BIGGEST OF ALL TIME?

Is this the biggest trailer ever produced in New Zealand? Robin Ratcliffe’s Modern Transport Engineers believe so. This is from the company’s website description of the monster trailer. . . The transporter was produced for a large Chinese client in 2002. It has a total of 144 Bridgestone 215 × 17.5 tyres in its combination and can have a further 176 tyres added to it. It stretches for some thirty metres behind the gooseneck.

All axles in the platform steer to a maximum of 45 degrees. This can be done in three ways: automatically off the king pin or draw bar and also manually using the hydraulic power pack. The trailer has a tare weight of 72 tonne. This increases by 4 tonne for each axle line (8 tyres) added and has a load capacity of 30 tonne per axle line.

Steel used in the complete trailer is 800MPa High Tensile. Modern Transport Engineering specially manufactured quenched and tempered axles. To reduce tare weight and minimise heat generated in the brakes and tyres, aluminium wheels have been used.

For rapid suspension speed and stability, the suspension cylinders have nitrogen gas accumulators built into them. The stability can also be changed from one with a gooseneck to one with a drawbar. It can also be altered by a variety of suspension combinations coupled to the gooseneck or transversely connected in the drawbar configuration.

The biggest for all time? Or the biggest yet? Who knows? Who knows what this industry, and in particular Robin Ratcliffe, will come up with next.

