

CHAPTER 4



Law, Suits & Other Memorable Characters of the Post War Era

FIRST RANK AMONG THE specialist trailer builders after the war was Ian Currie.

Ian, still working as a director of TMC Trailers in Christchurch – the oldest New Zealand trailer builder still in existence, served with the New Zealand Scottish regiment at Guadalcanal and Bougainville.

Significantly for what was to follow, part of that war service involved retrieving crashed American aircraft and stripping them for parts to keep New Zealand planes flying. The Americans provided the towing vehicles, either Whites or Chevrolets, which at 220 hp were twice the power of just about any truck back on New Zealand roads at that time.

They had to be, because Ian Currie's American-supplied tractor unit was hooked up to a transporter trailer, the first he or most other New Zealanders had seen up close at that point.

Ian says that experience during the war showed him and other New Zealanders the pulling power, literally and figuratively, of trailers. It would change him and the truck-trailer building industry.¹

Like all trailer builders then and many since, Ian Currie would start by looking at what was available and then try for something new and better.

"I decided I would build a trailer like the American one I had worked with in the Islands. The first I built was a 28ft flat-deck. We

spent a lot of time working it out, how to build it, and mostly where to get the bits and pieces—that was always the biggest problem."

The lack of material and, the more pertinent, lack of experience, would produce some interesting working methodology. Ian cites an example:

"We used to spend bloody hours experimenting, trying to calculate the stresses on the steel and what size material we needed to use. We started from square one and built them up and got them going.



(Above) An early Transport Nelson trailer built by TMC.

(Opposite) Ian Currie - founder of TMC Trailers.



¹ Ian Currie began his career in 1937 as a mechanic at his father's firm K.C. Currie Limited in the Christchurch suburb of Burwood. He rejoined the firm after five years war service, and it was then that he decided to move into trailer building. K.C. Currie Limited became Trailer Manufacturing Company Limited in 1948, which was in turn shortened to TMC Trailers LTD in 1989. It moved to its present premises in Shands Road Hornby in 1986.



An early TMC Bottom Dumper.

"And it was quite a big job. The time it took to build one trailer in those days, you could build about three big ones today. One of the problems that didn't help was that we used to be able to weld only at night. There was such a shortage of power in the suburbs we couldn't weld during the day, because as soon as we started the welder up it just put all the power out. So we did all the welding at night. We started at about 10 o'clock and go through till 6 or 7 in the morning. That was the only way we could get them built.

"Then there were the components. For example, we made our

axles out of truck hubs, put them on, built a beam on them and built the rest of the trailer up from there. That's what we started off doing. Later on, we started to get our equipment from Australia: brake drums and hubs and all those bits and pieces. But we made up our own axles here for a long time. You just had to, there was nothing else."

Fortunately for Ian and the other early trailer builders, their lack of experience was largely matched, if not exceeded, by that of the regulatory bodies. Ian recalls one occasion that illustrates the point, and points to an era of co-operation between the industry

and its regulatory bodies not quite matched since. It happened soon after he built his first semi (then called an articulator): "They brought the regulations in that you have to have a licence to drive an articulator trailer. I rang them up and got onto the Ministry of Transport about it in Christchurch and they said 'oh yeah, ok.' So a bloke came down and he didn't have a clue of how to drive it or anything. I took him down to the Brighton Racecourse, which was in front of the workshop. Taught him how to back it, drive it and turn it around and what to do with it, and then we went back to the workshop again and he gave me my licence to drive an articulator. That's how that happened in those days."

The early trailers built by TMC were single-axle semis with a flat deck. They were an instant success. At 10-ton load they could triple the capacity of the Internationals that towed them. Major customers for the company were Tullochs in the Deep South and Nelson Transport.

As the company's reputation for innovation and quality grew, so did its client list. And with new clients coming on board, so did requirements. Among them, transporters.

Ian: "The construction/roading companies were the first to use them. The likes of British Pavements (now Fulton Hogan). A lot of our early transporters were for them, mainly to haul bulldozers etc. They weren't cheap—a big three-axle transporter would set British Pavements back as much as £500!"

Ian Currie and TMC would go on to build transporters (considerably modifying and improving the early example he had towed in the Islands) and for considerably more than £500 each. Bottom dumpers were top business, and their production by TMC would help revolutionise the way roads were built. Later on curtainsiders and B-trains would come into production. Over time there would be far too many configurations and individual



Paul Currie, Chief Executive, TMC Trailers.

units for Ian or his son, Paul, who carries on the family dynasty as TMC's chief executive officer, to now recall.

But there is one trailer Ian Currie has a special affection for—it's that little 28-foot flatdeck semi, the first he built. He believes it could be still somewhere, "maybe in Mātaura, maybe out the back of Mac's place." We asked Mac (Tulloch); he thought about it for a minute, then shook his head: "Nope, don't think it's here now. Remember it well though."

William (Bill) Walker is something of a paradox in the context of this book. In an industry with a glut of larger than life characters, very little is known of Bill Walker's life before trailer building (or outside of it), and there are few photos of him.

Yet he is one of the most influential figures in the history of this industry, and is universally acknowledged by those who worked with him, were fired by him, or competed against him, as one of the best the industry has seen.

Law, Suits and
Other Memorable
Characters of the
Post War Era

Among Bill Walker's lasting contributions to the industry- the first New Zealand-produced spaced-axle-self-steer trailer,² the pioneering of impressive rows of eight transporters, tanker trailers, and the local production of hydraulic suspensions.

Then there are a few names to conjure with-Ian Stevenson, Bill Box, Les DeLacy, Ron Edge, all of whom got their starts through Bill Walker, plus a fiery but visionary young welder called Robin Ratcliffe who was hired and fired by Bill Walker in

the course of one morning.

These men, who would themselves go on to make major contributions to trailer building in New Zealand, are united-even Ratcliffe-in their appreciation of the role that Bill Walker played in their careers.

As for the young Walker himself, we know he was born in Westport, and that he came to Hamilton as a boy. We also know he started as an apprentice fitter and turner with Hamilton Engineering, helping assemble milking machines, and we know he and his wife Bernice started a general engineering company, W.P. Walker Ltd, in the mid 30s in Nisbet Street, Hamilton.

The rest of what went on in those early years is largely conjecture. We have to wait until the arrival on the scene of Les DeLacy before we can deal with Walker and his company with any certainty.

DeLacy was "no more than a kid" when he first met Bill Walker. He remembers visiting the Hamilton Engineering workshop with his father and meeting the imposing physical figure of Bill Walker there. "The kid" must have appealed to Walker, because in 1943 he employed DeLacy at W.P. Walker as an apprentice.

DeLacy remembers his new boss as tough but fair. "He (Walker) was pretty strict. He had his standards. If you came to work and as much as yawned, you were off home with a flea in your ear and told to get to bed earlier in future."

However, his rigid work ethos didn't apparently stop Walker disappearing from work for hours at a time to enjoy three of his other great interests-listening to Bing Crosby records (which he did for hours on end), playing golf, and speedboat racing (see side story). Being a boss in those days had few of the niceties and political correctness that permeate employment relations these days.



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Most of W.P. Walker's business, DeLacy recalls, was building concrete mixers. But toward the end of the war and continuing immediately after it, the company entered the transport field with a lucrative contract lengthening the chassis on ex-army trucks. These "stretched" Macs and Federals were then converted to city buses, taking Walker and his company off on a new direction and in 1946 to a new workshop in Victoria Street.

From that point, the business was largely trailers. And there were a lot of them. Les DeLacy recalls that most of the production was 25-foot trailers built for the Waikato Dairy Company.

In fact, Bill Walker designed the first tanker trailers for the dairy company. The first six tankers were built by Truscotts in Australia, but without turntables, axles, wheels or brake systems. Those were fitted in Hamilton by W.P. Walker, with the turntable and axle specially positioned to weigh-out correctly in compliance with New Zealand regulations. Although Truscotts

would later build complete trailers in New Zealand for Waikato Dairy Company, they kept to Bill Walker's design.

W.P. Walker (the company) would move to other fields and become known, among much else, for its rows-of-eight transporters—huge trailers built from the ground up with powerful but flexible box chassis.

W.P. Walker was nothing if not versatile. They built everything for trailers—everything except tyres. The company, for a time, even manufactured its own trailer brakes.

DeLacy's own responsibility at that time was assembling axles with hubs cast in Thames and machined and drilled in Walker's machine shop.³ Production also included stub axles with fabricated box sections.

For a time, they even built trailers under contract for other companies, resulting in what, by today's standards, would be considered nothing short of a phenomenal production output. An order for a trailer would come in on Monday morning, DeLacy recalls, and the completed trailer would roll out and be shipped Friday.

Most early Walker trailers had a distinctive feature that made them instantly recognisable—not that recognisability was a factor sought by Walker. The radial front of those early Walker trailers had a more practical function—to increase the overall legal length ahead of the kingpin.

Unfortunately, this was sometimes more successful in principle than in practice, particularly in the smaller, two-axle, trailers. The extra length sometimes shifted the load's centre of gravity to behind the back axle, with the result that the front of the trailer mounted the truck.

This led some wits in the industry to describe Walker "short" trailers as the only ones that could breed.

³ It is fair to point out that there is some debate about that claim (which in itself was never made by Walker). Some say that it was Manu Tzanui who produced the first self-steer. Perhaps, like many claims and counter-claims that have bedevilled the truck-trailer manufacturing industry (and provided many of its colourful stories) the truth may simply and more safely be left to a question of definition.

⁴ W.P. Walker wasn't the only local producer of trailer brakes. Many companies had a go at it through those years of import restrictions and relatively low production costs. One of the first and most durable of those companies was founded in 1939 by Hubert Tanner. That company, under the management of Hubert's son Doug existed until recently producing brake drums and conversions, flywheels and axles, as well as offering general engineering services. Tanner Engineering was recently sold to Ray Vincent Ltd.

SPEED MERCHANTS

Bill Walker and Frank Tapper, trailer manufacturers both, shared another interest—speedboat racing. Both were fanatical and highly successful at it.

Bill raced hydroplanes, and with one of them, *Miss Hamilton*, he won five New Zealand championships. A second Bill Walker hydroplane, *Cheetah*, which was often raced for Bill by Les DeLacy (the two once collided on the Waikato River near Ngaruawahia during a race), was eventually sold to the legendary professional wrestler and Whangarei pub-owner, Lofty Blomfield. There is no record of what happened to *Miss Hamilton*.

Frank Tapper's main boat was a Corvette-powered V-bottom called *Puddy Tat*. It was in *Puddy Tat* that Frank set a New Zealand water speed record of 70.347 mph on June 1958 at Flat Rock, Tamaki. That record would stand for eleven years.



A kingpin of another sort was DeLacy himself. Walker had faith in the young man he hired as an apprentice. There was one occasion, DeLacy recalls, when Walker showed that faith in a spectacular way—though DeLacy wishes to this day he hadn't. It was a day in the early 50s when the company had 14 staff, including DeLacy, in the Victoria Street workshop. Early in the morning Walker arrived at the workshop with the expressed intention of playing golf later that day. Nothing out of the ordinary there, and DeLacy was prepared as always to go on running the shop as leading hand. However, on this occasion, Walker gathered all fourteen staff for a pep talk. It didn't go well. By the end of the talk, Walker had fired thirteen of his staff, leaving DeLacy to run the show on his own—in fact, for several days, to be the show. DeLacy worked in the workshop on his own. Walker played golf.

"Good guy," says DeLacy with a wry grin recalling Walker. "But ruthless."

DeLacy, who now runs Aero Machinists and Engineers Ltd in Hamilton with son Paul, left Walkers in 1955 to start his own engineering shop at Hamilton Airport, working mainly for James Aviation.

In the 1960s, his sons Peter and Kim joined Bill Walker. It had always been a family business of sorts. Bill's wife Bernice was involved from the start and even sometimes working in the workshop, where she was, as recalls Les DeLacy, a "terrific lathe operator who could put many of us to shame."

The business grew under the expanded family management, with a vast array of trailers being built to all shapes, sizes and uses. But it was the company's foray into another endeavour that would prove its downfall and eventually bring a close to the Bill Walker chapter in New Zealand trailer building.

Details of the "foundry episode", as it applies to W.P. Walker Limited, are something of a mystery. Perhaps it should remain that way—there are few with us today who were directly involved with it, and how much of a contribution it made to the company's demise is a matter of some dispute.

Maybe it just should be left and described as an "unfortunate experiment".

It could have worked. The foundry was an investment, and in all respects except timing and funding, an astute one. It meant the company's operation could be extended into casting brake discs, wheel hubs and other components at a time when New Zealand-produced content on domestically assembled vehicles was set at 15%.

Unfortunately for W.P. Walker, the investment in the foundry and the Development Finance Corporation loan used to fund it could not have happened at a worse time.

Just as the company's foundry was gearing up to full production, the government slashed that content requirement overnight to 10%—far less than needed to sustain the foundry operation, or the loan.

Walkers was left exposed, vulnerable and in debt.

It would never recover.

By the early 1970s, Bill and Bernice had had enough. Peter and Kim were out of the business, and there was, in any case, not much business left. What there was left was sold to Mills-Tui in 1973, according to the latter company's records for the year.

Bill and Bernice "retired" to Katikati to become kiwifruit and avocado orchardists. Bill kept his hand in doing minor engineering work in the district.

Bernice, now in her 80s, is still there in Katikati, still on the orchard. Bill Walker died on 18 September 1994.



Frank Tapper.

Les DeLacy remembers going to the funeral.

Bill Walker was among the earliest and the best of the New Zealand trailer builders after the Second World War. He is remembered as a hard man, but the industry was, and still is to some extent, made up of hard men. Bill was no different. Bill did what he had to do to grow his business and keep his reputation for quality work. Nobody, then or now, would begrudge him that. Indeed, there are many within the industry today who freely admit they owe W.P. (Bill) Walker a great deal.

So does the industry. He remains one of its greats.

Frank Tapper was an interesting bloke. He was handsome, a

TIPPING OUR HAT

Frank Tapper's Tipulators weren't the first in New Zealand. Many were imported as early as the 50s. The problem with those, though, was that they were inclined to tip—not the load, the trailer, and of its own accord.

From his workshop in Whangarei, Frank did a lot of work improving the Tipulators' stability and even patented a new front ram for it. Most owners of the Tapper Tipulator reckon that it was far superior to the overseas' version.

The first was built for the Whangarei fertiliser works.

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TAPPER TIPULATORS

stylish dresser, a good family man, a speed freak, a good (and often spectacular) trailer builder, and, at the end, a deeply worried man. He wasn't in the trailer building business for long, but for the short time he was, his star burned bright.

Even so, remarkably little is known of him within the industry today. In comparison to some others we have looked at in this book, he never attained legendary status or the attendant kudos. It is not hard to fathom why. The brevity of his tenure in the business is an obvious reason why he is largely overlooked now. Another factor is that it is probably the way Frank would have wanted it. Frank was never a man to seek the limelight, though he did enjoy it when it came his way, his widow, Olive, recalls. He kept his head down and he built trailers.

And that in itself is something of a paradox. For a man who valued his privacy, the name of Tapper is emblazoned on a remarkable number of remarkable trailers – Big George for one (see story page 26), and who will forget the Tapper Tipulator series? But let's not get confused here—the omnipresent Tapper Transport and the Bill Tapper European vehicle dealership are not Frank Tapper legacies, though both are connected with the extended Tapper family.

It is an extended family. Frank was the third of ten sons and three daughters born between the wars. Money was scarce and became even scarcer in the Great Depression. The older boys, such as Ken Tapper who went on to become an engineer, managed to get an education before the depression. But the money ran out by the time Frank got to secondary school. His entire secondary education comprised a term in the third form at Auckland Grammar. He would have to go elsewhere for education—the "School of Life" as his daughter Julie describes it.



George Dale (centre) commissioned the Tapper built "Big George" Trailer.

Frank's pre-war years were spent far from the transport industry, and much else besides—in Horotiu. His father managed Sterling's grocery store there, and Frank was his delivery boy. The delivery vehicle was a horse and cart. Later Frank was promoted to assistant manager of Sterling's Te Kauwhata store. And it was there in a boarding house that he met a fellow guest, a young primary school teacher called Olive Lovatt.

It seems that Frank was desperate to impress the pretty teacher. One way was to show his prowess in backing the store's delivery truck through a narrow gap.

It seems to have worked. The two would become life-long partners in the transport business.

In 1935, soon after they married, Frank and Olive moved north to buy the grocery store at Pīpīwai, 40 kilometres north of Whangarei, along with the store came a school run.

And a bus.

Frank's formal link with transport began.

At his behest two of the Tapper brothers, Bill and Harry, moved north, and worked with Frank carting logs to Lovatt's sawmill in Whangarei.

Meanwhile, Olive ran the store until she and Frank started to build a family—Julie, Jacky, Dianne, Mark and Rob. The school-run was retained. But added to it came construction, engineering, quarrying, and significantly for us, a transport fleet, mainly carrying metal to the family-owned crushers.

Immediately after the Second World War, and with the return of several Tapper brothers serving overseas, there were no fewer than eight of the brothers involved with the company—a long-held dream of Pop Tapper—now called Tapper Construction and working out of Clyde Street in Whangarei.

It remained a diversified company, with most of the brothers taking up their chosen areas of interest. Frank's was transport engineering, which entailed bodybuilding, conversions, repairs and trailer building. It was at that time, 1945 and onwards, that one of Frank's most famous trailers, the Tapper Tipulator—a series of two-axle tipping trailers and variants—would catapult the Tapper name to the fore of trailer building in New Zealand. In 1951, Tapper Construction went public, with a majority ownership going to construction company William Cable Holdings Group, owners of A & G Price Ltd.

It was time to move the family and Frank's slice of the business. In 1953, Frank and family moved to Auckland and started Tapper Transport Engineering in Halsey Street near the Viaduct Harbour. The next eight years would bring one of the most intense and prolific production periods of any trailer builder in New Zealand.

Frank threw himself into his work. He seemed driven. It wasn't so much a case of putting in the hours—he was devoted to his

BY GEORGE!

This industry has produced a number of legendary trailer builders, but only one legendary trailer.

Big George was built in 1958 for Geo. Dale & Sons by Tapper Transport Engineering, then located on the corner of Fanshawe and Halsey Streets in Auckland. Roger Poore, who worked for Frank Tapper, designed it.

Designed in its original configuration to carry 80-ton payloads (in later configurations it would carry up to 200 tons), Big George's first substantial load, and the one it was built for, was an M.G. paper-roller to be transported from Auckland to Kinleith. The prime mover for that trip, and many others after, was a 150hp Leyland Hippo, assisted by an ERF Cummins-power diesel as a pusher vehicle with an LF petrol-engineered 190 International for hill work. A rear unit on the trailer was mainly used for steering but also had the ability to hydraulically tilt Big George to compensate for the camber.

The total time for that Auckland to Kinleith run was 5 days, including a stopover at Tirau while the railway bridge there was lifted so Big George and load could pass under it.



Big George at the New Plymouth Wharf.

The man who drove the pusher vehicle on that run, Ken Frandle (Bill Sunde drove the prime-mover), would later be promoted to lead driver for Big George. He remembers the monster trailer well and with respect:

"Big George was big, but not generally a problem to tow. We could have a bloke sitting in the back, who steered Big George in tight conditions, but mostly we locked it up and handled everything from the cab."

But Ken also remembers one incident when Big George didn't perform quite so well and had to be saved from a slippery situation (though not saved from embarrassment), by a miniscule 7-ton Commer: "We were hauling Big George over the Punga from Manunui to Turangi. It was wet and both our trucks—a new Leyland Buffalo, and the Leyland hippo, now the pusher—lost traction on a steep gradient. Nobody, least of all Big George, was going anywhere. Then along comes a local contractor called Butch Kellander in his 7-ton Commer. He said he would give us a tow. So we hooked him up and that gave us just enough traction to get it out. But old Butch sure played that story up for what it was worth, and it took us a while to live it down."

Big George went on to carry some of the biggest loads in the country. Loads exceeded only by those of the giant imported Cometto transporters, capable of carrying up to 768 tonnes, used widely for New Zealand's "Think Big" projects in the 70s and 80s.

Yes, the Comettos were bigger. But for its time Big George was our biggest locally built trailer, and—subjectively—our most honoured.

In the 1980s, it ended its days on the road and was offered as an exhibit to Auckland's Museum of Transport and Technology. Nice thought. Unfortunately, it came to nothing. Instead, the legendary Big George was cut up. But, aptly, it still ended its days delivering a final legacy to the industry: steel from Big George was used to build several smaller trailers still on our roads today.



Ken Frandie

family and spent as much time as he could with them—but while at Halsey Street, he seemed everywhere, doing everything.

His widow, Olive, describes him as building his dreams. Big George, the eponymous trailer built for George Dale, was an obvious one; the Tipulator, built and adapted to New Zealand conditions from an overseas design, was another. He even built boat trailers—though that is perhaps understandable, given his passion for speedboats.

His son, Rob, who as a boy spent a lot of time with Frank at Halsey Street, remembers him as immensely strong. He recalls his father, in pristine overalls, doing the jobs of two men. The son and fellow workers were constantly in awe of what he could accomplish.

Along with that strength, says Olive, was “an inherent lack of fear.” He was a trophy-winning motorbike racer and a record-holding

speedboat driver. He stood up to George Dale when necessary. Tribute should be made here to one of the other “strengths” of the company—partnership. Dave Domett had Russell Law, Jack Tidd had Ernie Binns—Frank Tapper had Roger Poore. Roger was an outstanding designer and engineer. Like Russell and Ernie, he preferred to work away assiduously in the background. His was much of the engineering knowledge that went into the more spectacular Tapper contributions such as Big George.⁴ Big George and other Frank Tapper trailers would be among the largest manufactured in New Zealand. But Frank could also turn his hand, and his undoubted expertise, to more “personal” projects such as boat trailers and powered concrete barrows, both of which had innovative features that added to the Tapper reputation for quality and diversity.

Unfortunately, personal interest and quality aren’t always compatible with productivity. And that is what A & G Price wanted more of—productivity. If necessary, they would introduce a production line into Tapper Transport Engineering to get it, whether Frank wanted one or not. He didn’t.

When Frank Tapper left secondary school at the age of 13, his first job was as an apprentice at DSC and Cousins, a company specialising in bus and van bodybuilding and repairs. In 1959, that company amalgamated with White’s Light Metal Industries Limited to form Associated Light Metals & Builders Ltd. What they needed was a general manager to run the company. What they had was an ex-apprentice who could be interested. Alf Gallagher, who ran Cousins, approached Frank, who was visiting Australia at the time—possibly to have a look at employment prospects over there.

The timing was fortuitous for both men. In late 1959, Frank Tapper was appointed General Manager of Associated

⁴ The reader may understandably soon come to the view that the formative days of industry were made up of—even due to—such partnerships. Frank and Roger, Jack and Ernie, with Dave (Domett) and Russell (Law) coming up; one the front man, the other in the background beaver away largely unknown outside the industry. The industry and the country owe a lot to these “unknown soldiers”.



The first Domett Premises.

Light Metals & Bodybuilders Ltd at the princely salary of sixteen hundred pounds a year. Tappers, A & G Price Ltd, and the trailer manufacturing industry had lost one of its leading lights and a man who, in just a few short years, built our biggest trailers and the biggest transport equipment manufacturing company of the era.

Frank's time with his new employer was tragically brief. Olive remembers looking at him one night as he worked on his beloved boat. She recalls thinking how many interests he enjoyed and how much he had achieved in his life.

The next night, Frank passed away as the result of a stroke. It was 1960. Frank had just turned 50.

Big George was, at its end, cut up and the steel used to build several smaller trailers. It may be said that there is a similarity between that and the legacy of the man who built George. George lives on in other, smaller, trailers. Frank's solid eight years of dynamic production in Halsey Street lives on in names such as Big George and Tapper Tipulator, in his sporting prowess, in the circumstance of his departure from Halsey

Street and, thankfully for this book, in the memories of family and colleagues who remember best this intensely private and proud man and doyen of our industry.

Leo Faulkner remembers him leading by example. He describes him as a good friend and as one of the most affable and likeable characters in the industry. In his obituary in *Transport News* of New Zealand, published the month after his death in April 1966, he is eulogised as a "good mate and a real good bloke." Neil Peterken describes him as "the greatest mentor someone starting off in this business could have."

Dave Domett is remembered today as one of the industry's giants and certainly one of its most influential figures. The shadow he cast from his base in Feilding covered much of the country from the 50s through to the 70s. Many of the men working in the industry today and running their own companies either got their start with Dave Domett or admit to learning a great deal from him—and not only about trailer building. Davie (Dave) Domett was born in the small Manawatu town of Feilding in 1913. It would remain his hometown and business centre for all his life. Later newspaper accounts on his life describe him as a kid with "indefatigable energy, brains and perseverance."

In a somewhat grandiose and self-serving example of self-importance, the *Feilding Herald* of 1959 reminds us that Dave Domett's first job was, "like many other men in important positions today" as a proof-reader in the local newspaper. But, young Dave Domett had other ideas on the importance of what he was doing, because he soon left that job and began a small, single five-ton truck enterprise transporting livestock to and from the Feilding saleyards. Dave Domett's association with



Russell Laro and Dave Domett.

transport had begun.

It didn't take him long to build both a fleet and some public importance in Feilding. His one-truck soon became a twelve-truck fleet, and he embarked on a pattern of service to his community, including—and this may have some bearing on his prodigious physical strength (see side story)—the local wrestling club, which would end only with his death. He also became a formidable industry figure: president of the New Zealand Trailer Manufacturers Federation, president (Manawatu) of the N.Z. Road Transport Alliance and executive member of the New Zealand Carrier's Federation, to name just a few of the industry bodies on which he served.

In 1940, he married Pat, and they would have three sons—Gary, Peter and Michael—the beginning of a family dynasty still a force in the industry today.

Perhaps Dave Domett's greatest contributions to the truck

DON'T TRY THIS AT HOME

Dave Domett was a generous host who liked to entertain. Friday nights at The Empire were Domett staff nights, and Dave was simply one of the boys. If a customer was visiting Feilding, the venue shifted to the Denbigh Hotel, which offered accommodation, home-cooked meals, a guest bar which stayed open long after the 6 o'clock closing of other bars, and Dave Domett as the consummate and entertaining host.

Dave is remembered as being able to hold his liquor with the best of them, though he was never a big or competitive drinker. What he preferred was to show his acumen in another area—trials of strength.

In researching this book, I heard of—and had described to me—the Domett Door Feat by three sources. However, I still couldn't quite visualise it. That was until a visit to Mac Tulloch in Matura, who had also seen it done by Dave, and in fact could do it himself—one of the few who could. Moreover, Mac was willing to demonstrate it to me.

Physical Prowess (and a high stud) is needed to accomplish the Dave Domett Door Feat, as described and demonstrated by Mac Tulloch.

It begins with an open door. Stand with your back to the edge of the door, and reach backwards over your head to grasp the top of the door with both hands; then, using arm strength (and possibly a little practised technique), try to lift your body from the floor. Then in one fluid motion similar to a backward somersault lever your body up and over to end the feat sitting astride the top of the door.

It needs to be remembered that Dave Domett—and clearly also Mac Tulloch—were immensely strong. We know that Dave Domett was, in his early days, involved with wrestling, and this may have added to his strength.

Whether the feat helped Dave Domett directly with trailer building is questionable; that it was impressive, memorable, and a colourful addition to the legendary status of Dave Domett, is not.



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⁵ No records exist for what that trailer was. Likely, it was built as early as 1947, but we have to wait until 1954 for the earliest production record of a Domett Trailer—a 4-ton flatdeck (chassis # 101) built for Thompson Transport in Marton. The company was also at that time building chassis for hoppers, one of which (chassis # 114)—a Barber Engineering built hopper atop the Domett chassis—may have been the first in New Zealand. The earliest Domett trailer still in existence is number 116, a 14-footer, built in 1954, for Feilding Transport. That trailer is stored today at Fruehauf's Feilding plant.

⁶ Later Domett's would move into the South Island in partnership with Christchurch company Beadle Engineering (Beadleweid Trailers) and even consider at one point opening a manufacturing plant in a disused dairy factory in Brighton, about five miles south of Mātara. Nothing eventuated of it, and Mac Tulloch later purchased that factory at auction for the knockdown price of £5000.



Bottom Dumpers - built for the airport project. (Opposite) The original self steering spaced-axle logging trailer designed by Russell Law.

trailer manufacturing industry were his company, Domett Truck and Trailer Co. Ltd, and his hiring of a designer/engineer called Russell Law.

The company first...

Dave's foray into trailer building began in 1947 when, dissatisfied with trailers currently available for his fledgling cartage company, Dave Domett Limited, he applied for a license to build his first trailer. That clearly, but only in retrospect, is a significant watershed for the company. Dave Domett didn't see it that way, though. Not then, at least. He built his first trailer simply because he needed one for his own company. Trailers

weren't core business.⁵

But just about everything else in transport was. From 1946 to 1951 when Dave sold his original transport company to the drivers and formed Domett Truck and Trailer Co. Ltd, which did have as its core business trailer building, he created Feilding's biggest company and largest employer. The Domett group of companies, Domett Truck and Trailer Co., Domett Lime Co., and Highway Engineering Ltd, would occupy over an acre of ground on the corner of Aorangi and Gladstone Streets.

Dave would also attract and employ, mainly through the force of his personality and his vision for trailer building, some of the

soon-to-be most influential people in the industry. People such as Russell Law (Chief Designer), Neil Peterken (Chief Engineer) and Leo Faulkner (Sales Manager, Trailers).

They, along with Robbie Hill running the factory in Feilding, became a powerful team that soon dominated trailer building in the North Island.⁶

The impetus and much of the sales method were still very much overlaid with Dave Domett's character and vision. Leo Faulkner, who joined Domett's in 1958 as a trailer salesman, remembers the Domett influence:

"There weren't too many trailers being built in those days.

But Dave had been to America and Europe and took 16mm movie films of trucks and trailers, and one of my first jobs was to cart Dave's films around the country showing them to carriers and showing them what could be done. It really was more a case of selling the idea than selling the product. Selling the product would come later."

"The only real resistance we had was 'oh well, our roads couldn't handle a trailer.' So Dave and I came up with the idea of taking a 14-foot trailer towed behind an International Ute and leaving it with those carriers to try it out themselves. They soon found out that, yes, they could use a trailer on their roads, and, yes, they could pull them behind their own

vehicles. It wasn't often we had to take our demo trailer home again."

It wasn't all plain sailing though. Leo Faulkner admits to the odd failure, one of which, as far as he knows to this day, Dave Domett was never told about:

"One of the problems we had earlier on was a debate about where the brakes should be on a trailer. We'd been going a while, and we fitted the brakes on our trailers to the front axle because we claimed that, when braking, weight was transferred to the front. When an Auckland company started building trailers, they put their brakes on the rear axle, claiming that the unit would

be pulled from the rear, thus avoiding a jack-knife situation. This became an issue within the industry as to who was right.

"So one day, Russell Law and myself had just about had enough of this argument. We decided to do a bit of our own research. As it was hard to tell what part the towing vehicle played in assisting the trailer brake, our plan was to let the trailer do all the braking. We hooked up a trailer to the back of our ute and cut a slot in the deck of the ute, through which we put a lever welded to the Ringfeder coupling. The idea was that when I got the ute and the trailer up to





Stan Williamson 2nd from right, sharing a yarn with Dick Parker.

around 25 miles an hour, I would yell out to Russell sitting in the back, and he would pull the lever to break the coupling and release the trailer. I would then accelerate away in order to break the vacuum lines, which would in turn activate the breakaway valve to the brakes."

"That was the theory, and it worked well to a point. But we overlooked the fact that the ute had worked so hard to get the trailer up to release speed that no vacuum had been made in the trailer system. After I accelerated, we just sat there goggle-eyed as the brakeless trailer swept past our ute and us, and disappeared into a ditch. We kind of gave up on the second part of our experiment then, trying the same thing with brakes on the rear axles, and rung for the company crane to come and get Dave's trailer out of the ditch. I think he was overseas at the time."

Leo admits to this day that he still doesn't know the answer to the front or rear axle braking debate, but now living in retirement in Katikati, he is not about to repeat the experiment any day soon.

Generally, however, such lapses of judgement on the part of Domett staff were few. Workshop manager Robbie Hill, who joined Domett's in 1954, recalls that the focus was on quality, and that Dave Domett instilled a sense of production pride in his staff. Neil Peterken, who joined Domett's in 1960 and would go on in 1963 to run the Domett's Auckland branch with Leo Faulkner, echoes the sentiment: "Dave Domett was fanatical about quality. He wasn't above striding down to the workshop to pull apart some components to check that everything was up to scratch. Even when something was finished, he would insist on our testing it. Part of my job was taking our bottom dumpers down to the river and filling them up with gravel. Bugger of a thing to clean them afterwards, but that is what Dave wanted, and that's what Dave got. You didn't argue when it came to quality."

On one occasion, cleaning the bottom-dumpers was the least of Neil's problems. Cleaning Feilding's main square was a far greater challenge. He recalls the story: "I took one of the bottom dumpers down to Dave's quarry to load it up with gravel, which was then to be spread as a test on some designated and quite secluded stretch of road. Unfortunately, to get to that stretch of road, I had to drive the dumper through Feilding Square, which was anything but secluded—and certainly not designated for the dumping of metal.

"Unfortunately, the test began prematurely, and on this occasion resulted in a very public failure. One bump and the yet to be quality tested locking system on the doors released the doors, spreading the load into the middle of the square."

Neil remembers a very unhappy Dave Domett and a six-man task force from his Road Freighters company, armed with shovels, storming into the square. Not a word was said to the red-faced designer/driver/amateur quality tester, but Neil says he was under no illusion as to what the debacle would cost him.

Dave Domett and the Road Freighters crew drank long and hard that night in the Empire. And the young designer/quality tester was considerably out of pocket.

Russell Law can today, even with the passage of years, be seen as one of Dave Domett's major legacies to the industry. Universally respected, Wilfred Russell Law, who graduated Bachelor of Engineering from Auckland University, is acknowledged as one of the all-time great trailer designers and innovators.

His was the original design of the steering spaced axle-logging trailer. He developed the self-steer semi-trailer, which ultimately led to the introduction of today's 13-metre semis, and he is also credited with introducing the bottom dump semi-trailer. The latter would go on to be instrumental in hastening the building of many roads in both islands, and in the construction of Auckland airport's runway in Mangere.

He was a foundation member and also the first Fellow of the New Zealand Institute of Road Transport Engineers, a member of the American Society of Automotive Engineers, and was, several times, president of the New Zealand Truck and Trailer Manufacturers' Federation (now the New Zealand Truck-Trailer Manufacturers' Federation).

Russell Law and Dave Domett worked as a team. If Dave is remembered as the driving force, Russell is recalled as the visionary, the builder and the designer.

Mac Tulloch remembers how he employed the Russell Law/Dave Domett team in the development of one of the first bottom dumpers, which Mac would go on to call Gravelmasters: "I saw a design of a similar thing in a book from the States. They had them over there. So I rough-sketched what I thought a Gravelmaster would look like, and I sent it up to Feilding to



Russell Law (left)

Russell Law, telling him roughly what I wanted and told him to design it so that the loading was right on the axles and all that sort of thing. He eventually sent me back a blueprint. I just looked at it, put it in the envelope and sent it back. I said build it. He was a very clever engineer, Russell Law."

Another transport operator who remembers Russell Law's prowess is Bay of Plenty identity Stan Williamson, now living in semi-retirement in Te Puke. Williamson: "The great thing about Russell was he was a design engineer. He had a grasp of both disciplines, and he knew and believed in what he was doing.

"Russell did not stand fools lightly, and if somebody went off the deep end and criticised something that Russell thought was premature or unworthy of that criticism, he would have no problem at all in telling him so. He was simply a very good engineer and no-nonsense-guy."

Russell Law has been called many things, including visionary and no-nonsense-guy (the word genius also comes up occasionally),



Rod Steel pictured with children Maryann, Graeme and John, all active in the family business.

but the most universal appellation is "a nice bloke". It seems that just about everybody who came across Russell Law liked him. Respected him. And would accord him legendary status in the industry. No problem. No problem at all. "The guy deserves it". Russell Law died on 18 March 1988, aged 59, just one year after retiring from the company (then Domett Fruehauf).

Dave Domett, trailer builder, doyen of the Empire and the Denbigh, built a strong team around him. A generous man, he would give them most of the credit for the company's spectacular growth in those first formative years after the war. His name, the Domett name, would for a long time reign supreme in the North Island, while Ian Currie's TMC would dominate the South.

But both men, both companies, were about to face fierce

competition in their respective markets.

The going would get tough. And so would the men involved.

Rod Steel was not a man to suffer fools. He said he met a few, mainly bureaucrats. But, out of the trailer building business for close on half a decade, he could afford to look back at his contemporaries and competitors with a respect he not always admitted to at the time.

It is hard, even today, to get a grip on Rod Steel. He was fiercely proud of what he had achieved and the legacy he believed he was leaving the truck-trailer manufacturing industry.

That legacy includes one of the country's most successful exporting companies—their container handling equipment is exported to



Joseph Steel



David Steel



George Steel

over 70 countries, and the Steelbro Sidelifter is one of the best selling of its type in the world—and two sons, John and Graeme, still in the business.

But Steel did not dwell on the present. He was most proud of earlier days when he came close to dominating trailer building in this country. At its peak in the 1970s, his company was producing about 350 trailers a year and had 40% of the overall market. His trailer hire business alone had 300 trailers, all of them built by Steel Bros.

Even earlier in pre-trailer times, just about everything to do with road transport in New Zealand had the (then) Steel Bros name stamped on it.

Those were great days, said Steel. Days in which he rubbed

broad shoulders regularly with prime ministers and ministers, and equally regularly rubbed up the wrong way "petty" bureaucrats, industry contemporaries, and just about everybody else who stood in the way or other wise tried to obstruct Rod Steel's vision for his family firm.

Rod Steel was the third in line of this multigenerational family company, now 125 years in business. Brothers, David and Joseph Steel started the company in 1878. Its primary business was coach building, though the brothers soon instituted an expressed policy of "if it is on wheels, Steels makes it."

As we have surmised earlier in this book, anything may well have included early truck-trailers, though there is none such in the company's manufacturing record until 1957.

HIRE GUNS



Sir Russell Pettigrew

The sale of Rod Steel's trailer hire business in 1982 illustrates how some deals were (and still are) done in this industry. In this story, told by Rod Steel, we are privy to the machinations, impatience with outsiders, and above all mutual respect exhibited by three leading road transport figures of the 80s: Sir Russell Pettigrew, Freightways' managing director and chairman of its board, that company's general manager, Trevor Farmer, and Rod Steel—men who knew their industry and knew each other. Freightways had just made an offer to buy the trailer hire business. Rod recalls the face-to-face meeting:

"I went to Auckland to meet with some of the Freightways people. John (Steel) came with me and we sat with Russell Pettigrew and Trevor Farmer. They had also just appointed a solicitor/joker that they thought was a bright idea.

"Anyhow, we agreed to certain terms and things and then (the solicitor) starts to want to know this and want to know that. Harp, harp, and back onto the same things. He really tries to outwit us not outplay us, just outwit us. In the finish, it was getting late in the day, and I knew that Russell was still in the office. So I left the room, told them I was going to the toilet or something, and went and saw Russell.

I said 'Russell, look man, I'm not going to be mucked around like this. So, if you want the trailer hire business, I'll tell you something—it's 5 o'clock now, I'm on the 7 o'clock plane tonight and I'm going on it. Either you agree to pay me what I want or the deal's off. I've allowed you to let this bloody solicitor/joker extend himself and experiment with us and all that, but I'm not going to listen to any more stuff from him. There's the deal Russell, you sort it out because I'm off in an hour, and so is the deal, if you don't intervene.'

Anyhow, Russell came and intervened, so of course it was finished up inside an hour because it was all over.

They agreed to buy it – we agreed to sell it, so there was no mucking around after that. We all got exactly what we wanted.

Then Trevor came back to me about 12 months later and said 'Hey Roddy, that tyre business of yours – want to sell it?'

George Steel took the helm for his father, Joseph, in 1938 and one year later began its first motor assembly work, which in time would encompass Morris and Austin commercial chassis and cabs, Toyota car assembly, and even the rightly renowned Lotus Seven sports cars. Other manufacturing operations and agencies included Hiab cranes, International Harvester cabs, repairs and fabricating. But not trailer building. Not formally.

That would have to wait until the newly appointed office boy of 1946 would gain an influence in the company.

The start was not auspicious. Steel Bros' workshop manager in 1946, Ted Morse, looked aghast at the reporting to work of the boss's third son, Rodney Douglas Harris Steel. Not one to mince words, Ted took his concerns straight to George:

"George, have you gone off your bloody rocker? Don't you realise that the first and second generations make it and the third stuffs it up? The best advice I can give you is for (Rod) to pack up and go home and take another job."

Doubly determined not to "stuff it up" Rod Steel threw himself into 70-hour working weeks. For a time, he also tried accountancy lectures at Canterbury University, but gave that up after deciding to learn the numbers game on the job. He did however, have more formal and lengthy training in drafting and design at night-school.

Business expanded rapidly under the stewardship of George Steel and his rising star son, Rod. Rod was instrumental in that growth, and clearly committed to it, as his wife, the late Marjorie Steel, was to find soon after their marriage in February 1950. Rod tells the story:

"Marjorie and I went on our honeymoon to Wanaka, Queenstown, Invercargill and Dunedin. According to Marjorie, it turned out to be the first of our 'business trips,' because we

called on, in particular, Eric Jeffs, city engineer for the Invercargill City Corporation, and sold him 18 busses."

In 1950, the honeymooning, bus-selling Rod Steel was one of about 60 workers at the company's Lincoln Road plant. Six years later, he was one of 100, and the company was moving forward rapidly, particularly through building coaches.

However, the easing of import licensing in the mid-50s saw this side of the business diminish, and the Steels, father and son, decided in a change of focus.

They were about to usher in the era of Steelbro hoists, tipping bodies and trailers.

The first trailer built by Steel Bros, at least as far as recorded, was a pole jinker, built for Westland transport in 1959. It comprised a single-axle with a rotating bolster, and an expandable pole that could allow log-lengths of anywhere up to 37 feet. The next trailer, built the same year and demonstrating the company's diversity, was a semi for Certified Concrete. And then back to jinkers.

The company's "have a go at anything" philosophy required a high degree of experimentation, something that Steel Bros shared with other trailer builders of the time. Steel Bros South Island sales manager, Roger Greenhalgh, who started with the company in 1959 as an apprentice motor body builder, recalls that early but universal *modus operandi*:

"It really was seat of the pants stuff. You would get a piece of paper or a bit of chalk on the ground and draw a trailer. The tradesmen of those days were capable of knocking up something that looked something like what you'd drawn on the ground with a bit of chalk. Then you hoped like hell that the trailer wouldn't bloody break in half. In other words, we used the transport industry as our field-testing ground. We had no other way—certainly no precedents to work on."



Roger Greenhalgh still adopts a hands-on approach.



One of Steel Bros early logging jinkers.

⁷ In June 1955, Ted Morse retired after a working lifetime in the industry. He began his career manufacturing rigs and finished it with assembly-line motor vehicles. In that time, he had revised his opinion of third generations coming into the family. "Better off with him than without him," was his gruff but new opinion of Rod Steel.

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⁸An interesting adjunct to the Poor Man's Drive was the Gates Belt Drive imported by Jim Wilkinson of Cambridge. This consisted of a pulley mounted between the front driving duals and another two pulleys on the trailing axle. Connecting the pulleys was a large v-belt that produced the drive to the trailing axle. Jim and users would admit that it worked perfectly on the benign macadam of on-highway, but problems would arise off-highway. Then, stones jammed between the dual tyres suddenly hit the v-belt and were ejected with lethal force for quite some distance. The Gates Belt Drive had the potential to become something of a weapon of mass destruction.

⁹It is with regret and sadness that we record the death of Rod Steel in 2004. The author remembers Mr Steel with a great deal of affection—for his support for this book, and for the courteous and generous way he approached this project.

However, lack of precedent doesn't always equate to lack of patent or to fewer accusations of plagiarism. Such accusations of "stealing our idea" by one trailer builder or another were numerous in these post-war, pre-regulatory days.

However, most disputes were settled amicably and in the end, weren't of great commercial importance to either party. In practice, most innovations within the industry couldn't be credited to a single party. More often, they were an amalgam of ideas from various sources, not the least of those sources being the transport operator customer, who always exerts a great influence on the type and configuration of trailer he wants.

Nevertheless, that didn't stop early trailer builders fighting among themselves as to who originated an idea.

One of the more celebrated cases, from the late seventies, involved a mechanism colloquially called the Poor Man's Double Drive. The Poor Man's Double Drive is, like many good ideas, a simple one: an axle like a 6-8 tonne trailer axle is mounted behind the truck driving axle and connected through the truck suspension.

However, this configuration, also called a tag axle, had limitations. When on uneven ground, too much load sat on the tag axle and the truck could get cast (stuck).

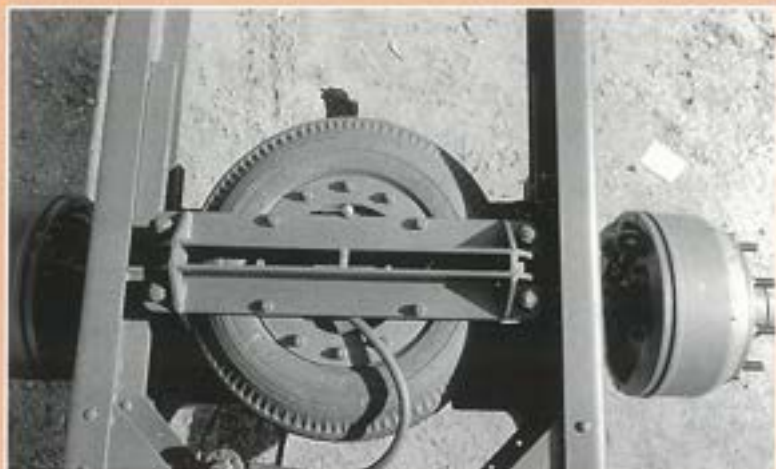
To solve the problem, a 14-inch car tyre sandwiched between two steel plates was fitted above the tag axle and attached horizontally to the truck chassis. To transfer weight from the tag axle to the driving axle for more traction, all the operator had to do was engage a valve in the cab and inflate the car tyre, which lifted the tag axle via wire ropes. Once back on the highway, he would then deflate the tyre and both axles would take their share of the load. Simple.

What was more complex and at issue was who had rights to the mechanism. The idea was patented by Tidd Ross Todd (TRT)



Gates belt drive.

but was later incorporated into some Steel Bros' trailers. When early "cease and desist" letters from TRT solicitors to Steel Bros failed to produce a result, an implacable Dave Carden, then managing director of TRT, phoned his southern counterpart, the intractable Rod Steel, direct. Their brief but sensible exchange:



Poor man's double drive.

"Rod," begins Dave, "the only people making money out of this are solicitors. Right?"

"Right," replies Rod. "Let's forget them. If we can't sort this out as managing directors, we aren't any bloody good to anyone. What do you suggest?"

"I suggest that you pay me what it's cost me to pay my solicitors and..."

"Done!"

"And a case of scotch. And we'll call it quits."

"A what?"

"My solicitor's fees..."

"I got that. The other thing."

"A case of scotch."

"A case of scotch?"

"Yep."

"How much are your solicitor's fees?" asked Rod

Dave tells him, then begins to add: "And a case of scotch costs..."

"I know what that costs. I'll think about it."

Rod did. Two days later, TRT's Te Rapa office took delivery of a cheque, taped to a case of scotch addressed to Dave Carden. The Poor Man's Double Drive had suddenly become an expensive item.⁸

However, such inter-island rivalries among trailer builders were and are rare and rarely of significance. Whilst it's true that Domett penetrated the south on its own account, through its partnership with Beadleweld, and Steel Bros moved north to Auckland, where they continue, under the management of Rod Steel's son, Graeme, to successfully market container handling equipment, most rivalry occurred with near neighbours.

In the South Island in the early days, that rivalry was primarily between Steel Bros and TMC, and was at times intense. The past principals of those two companies, Rod Steel⁹ and Ian Currie, will admit today to a grudging respect for each other but little else.

The North Island was and is a different story. There, the sheer number of transport operators and trailer builders, the rapid economic and population growth of the regions, and the emergence of new industries such as forestry, would produce the industry's most volatile but productive mix of people. Northern friendships, patience and significantly, design innovations, were pushed to their limits and beyond.

We head into that volatile mix next.