

Chalk, Chips and Changes –The Rotorua Builders



IN 1794 THE ROYAL NAVY BRIG *Fancy* anchored off the Coromandel Coast and took delivery of a cargo of kauri spars. Those spars were bound for the ship-builders of Britain and would be the first of what would become a major export industry– one that would eventually create thousands of jobs, entire townships, millions of dollars of revenue, and a new centre of truck-trailer building – Rotorua.

The first large-scale plantings of exotic softwood plantations in New Zealand began as early as 1897. But it wasn't until much later, and well into another century, that forestry, the milling of logs and their transportation, matured as major industries.

During the 1920s, government agencies planted 150,000 hectares of pine trees. Private interests weighed in with a further 120,000 hectares. Almost all of the planting was in the central North Island, where the Volcanic Plateau provided large tracts of cheap and otherwise unproductive land.

Despite the prevalent pine species, *radiata*, flourishing in New Zealand's warm moist climate–far better, in fact, than in its native California, where it is now virtually non-existent–the plantings of 1920s didn't come into full maturity until the 1950s.

Then came the cutting and, more significantly for this history, the transporting of the logs to Tokoroa and New Zealand Forest Products, to the Kinleith plant to make kraft pulp and papers, and later to Kawerau and the Tasman Pulp and Paper plant for making newsprint.

From 1950 to 1960, production from these companies, based and dependent as they were on the burgeoning State's exotic forests, grew rapidly. By the end of the decade, annual production of pulp was 261,000 tons, and the demand for small-diameter top logs, used for pulp processing and milled mainly by the Kaiangaroa Logging Company, was insatiable.

Further impetus for Forestry and associated industries, towns and ports came in the early 1960s with the first large-scale export of logs to Japan. Initially, this export was more a convenience–an afterthought: the logs were poor quality and unwanted in New Zealand. Nevertheless, the Japanese were willing to take them, but they still needed to be felled, and someone had to transport them to the rapidly expanding port of Mt Maunganui.

Forestry and logging would make the port of Mt Maunganui; they would also create towns such as Tokoroa and Kawerau. But the town that would benefit most was the one in the centre of this forestry universe–Rotorua.

Rotorua has always been a lucky town–an opportunist town. Rich in natural and marketable assets, it has produced a population adept at exploiting what Nature provided and augmenting it with what they themselves create. The original settlers, the mighty Arawa, knew the advantage their unique geothermal resource gave them and fought fiercely to protect it. Later they would work in concert with Europeans to exploit



Manu Tuanui

expand and market those natural resources. Bathhouses would be built, geothermal areas made more accessible, hotels would sprout like the crystalline silica of the thermal areas (in 1900, there were more hotels in Rotorua than private residences). Even disasters such as the 1986 Tarawera eruption and its destruction of the Pink and White Terraces at Rotomahana would be turned into a marketing opportunity.

Nevertheless, tourism can only do so much, and whilst Rotorua's temporary population soared during the tourist season, the permanent population remained relatively static.

That would change dramatically with the emergence of the

"new" industry of forestry. The town, soon to be a city, and the great forests that surrounded it, would attract a new breed of opportunist—men and women with skills looking for an outlet. Rotorua's population would double in the 50s and 60s.

Among those attracted by the "green gold", was a quietly spoken Chatham Islander, around whom would be created a legend and a mana that are today still resonant throughout New Zealand.

His name was Manu Tuanui.

Whether **Manu Tuanui** set out to become this country's best trailer builder, and whether he was, matters little.

What matters, and is not disputed, is that he became universally and indelibly recognised for the quality of his work and for the pervading influence on the entire trailer-building industry.

The trailer building and general engineering company, N.Z. Arc Welding Works, which he set up in Rotorua with his wife Marjorie in 1954, would, under the brand Tui Trailers, build about 80 per cent of all trailers used by the logging industry in the 1960s and become one of New Zealand's biggest manufacturers and exporters of heavy transport trailers. Manu would perfect and eventually patent the self-steering axle and become a pioneer in the technique and technology of manufacturing alloy bodies for trucks and trailers.

In the process, the company Manu and Marjorie built became one of Rotorua's biggest manufacturing companies and the city's largest privately owned enterprise, employing 50 staff, some of whom are the leading lights of the industry today.

Manu himself is no less interesting than the company and the trailers he created. He was born Manu Konga Whare-Tuanui (he later changed his name by deed poll to Manu Tuanui when applying for a New Zealand passport) on Pitt Island in 1919,

the eldest of 11 children. He was not, as is still widely assumed in the industry, a Moriori. His Maori tribal affiliations were Te Atiawa and Ngati Matanga.

His father, Konga Tuanui, was a farmer and sometime commercial fisherman. Manu followed his father into both professions, though fishing was his first love. He left school at the age of 14, and by 16 was fishing fulltime; by the age of 21 he was the skipper of his own boat.

But those were the days before the Chatham Islands' crayfish boom, and there was little profit to be made in harvesting haupuka at a farthing a pound. Manu decided to try his hand at something else, somewhere else.

Manu moved to Christchurch and was for a time employed at the Addington Railway Workshops as profile cutter. He also tried his hand at welding and liked it so much that he returned to the Chathams to sell his boat, then went to Canterbury Technical college to study welding at night school while working fulltime each day for an engineering firm.

From 1951 to 1954 he honed his welding skills on the hydro project at Mangakino. In 1954 he and Marjorie moved to Rotorua, where they started N.Z. Arc Welding Works in a rented 20ft x 20ft shed in Rotorua's Pukuatua Street. Manu working alone in the workshop, Marjorie did secretarial and accounting work in the office. Their first job was an A-frame and bolster for a logging truck fitted out for Sam Andrews of Mokai.

Logging trailers were clearly going to be Manu's speciality and destiny, but he also at that time single-handedly constructed a complete house transporter for a house removal pioneer and local transport identity Dick de Vantier.

Simultaneously, Manu was developing one of the better-known and respected trailer brands, Tui Trailers. The brand's distinctive

Tui logo would become omnipresent on trailers and mud flaps throughout New Zealand.

Few contemporaries could compete with Manu's diligence and dedication (or his skill). He secured major contracts, including the largest single contract ever in the industry up to that time; 24 trailers, including dollies, for R.G. Woolston. That contract would eventually lead to the biggest trailer N.Z. Arc Welding

TRANSPORT OPERATORS PLEASE NOTE!

"TUI" TRAILERS are Manufactured and Sold ONLY by N.Z. ARC WELDING WORKS LTD.

"TUI" is a Registered Trade-Mark, and this famous name appears only on Trailers and Bodies manufactured by N.Z. Arc Welding Works Ltd.

Mills General Engineering Ltd. have no connection whatsoever with N.Z. Arc Welding Works Ltd. and are not — as published erroneously by this newspaper yesterday — selling agents for "Tui" Trailers.



*NZ's finest
builders of
trailers & bodies to
the transport industry*



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R.G. Woolston off-highway logging artic at Murupara.

¹ Driven as he was for quality in his own work, Manu Tūmanu could also recognise and reward the quality work of others. The circumstance of Manu's hiring of John Eason illustrates the point. Eason: 'I'd been doing some work out at Kiwi Ranch building their chapel, and Manu came out one day with some steel he donated. I didn't know him and he didn't know me, but he looked at my welding, said he liked the look of it and that I had better come and work with him. That was it. Two months later, after finishing my apprenticeship, I was working for him.

Works would make—a giant 24-wheeler, 97' 6" off-highway logging artic and trailer capable of carrying 80 tons of logs at one time. It cost Bob Woolston \$35,000.

With such contracts under his rapidly expanding belt and a thriving business "repairing the work of others", Manu's company grew rapidly. It moved from the shed (so small that Manu had to build his trailers outside and leave the shed for storage) to Old Taupo Road, and then to Pururu Street and a new 15,000 square foot workshop, now the site and one of two workshops owned by Mills-Tui Limited.

Manu was making his mark. But it was to cost him.

Quality work and self-challenge were important to Manu – even

if they came close at one point to killing him. John Eason, who is today supervisor of Mills-Tui's fabrication workshop, but started as a welder at N.Z. Arc Welding Works, tells the story: "I had done a bit of alloy work in Auckland – alloy welding and that was something (Manu) knew little about, but he and (Neil) Peterken saw the potential of alloy trailer bodies. Manu decided to buy an alloy welder, but I said I wasn't very keen on this machine, the one he'd got. And he said, 'Right, give it to me.' So I showed him how to use it, and he welded up the bottom of a body. He was out there in his shorts with no overalls. He got burnt so badly from the ultra violet rays he was on a bed for over a week recovering from the burns. But he did it. He learnt to use it"¹

Manu Tuanui instilled in his staff a need for perfection that he demonstrated daily in his own work ethos. It was, Neil Wylie recalls it, "a culture". Neil, who today runs his own company, Innovative Transport Equipment in Rotorua, but started out at N.Z. Arc Welding Works sweeping floors after school, describes the atmosphere: "Manu did a full day's work, and he expected everybody else to work hard themselves. If he saw somebody dragging the chain on him, it didn't take Manu long for him to light up and explode. He had one guy there who used to weld side-arms and bolsters, and actually had the nickname of Speed. Well, there was nothing speedy about Speed. Every day he used to go to the toilet at 2 o'clock and stay in there until almost smoko time. Manu just couldn't stand it, and one day he ended up tossing buckets of water into the toilet with the guy in there. The guy stands on the toilet, so Manu races around the back with a hose and gets him from the other side. That's the kind of thing Manu did if he thought someone wasn't pulling his weight. At the same time, you knew if you worked hard for him and did a good day's job, boy he was a good bloke, a good bloke to work for."

And work they did. At its height, N.Z. Arc Welding Works was producing about 80% of all logging trailers built in New Zealand at that time. Some of those trailers would make their way to Australia, others to Taiwan. The patented self-steer axle Manu perfected (see side story page 47) was exported – \$200,000 worth in just 12 months – to these countries, and several in South America.

And the business was not restricted to logging trailers. Advertisements for the company show an eclectic mix of trailers ranging from stock trailers to tippers. Manu also volunteered his welding and steel fabrication services to local churches, and was responsible for most of the steel fabrication work in Rotorua Girl's High.



H. Allen Mills (right) discussing the construction of the Taupo Marina with the then Prime Minister Sir Keith Holyoak (left).

At the start of the 1970s, N.Z. Arc Welding Works was going strong; Manu, Marjorie, and works foreman Eric Meecham had assembled a committed and loyal team. Through their efforts, the company had captured far and away a lion's share of burgeoning trailer manufacturing business in the Bay of Plenty. But there was another lion circling. N.Z. Arc Welding Works' success caught the eye of another legendary character in the industry, the formidable H. Allen Mills.

Hugh Allen Mills was by that stage a powerful figure in Rotorua, and as one of the district's largest contractors and a generous benefactor to the community, he gained and deserved considerable political and media clout.

He was also a self-made man, with a farming/contracting/engineering/trailer building empire built through hard work and an eye for opportunity.

That empire gave him rights of passage to what in the 1950s and 1960s, was close to being a closed-off echelon of upper society

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² In one of those accidents, a plane crash at Ohura in 1958, Mills would lose a leg. But even that didn't faze him. In fact, he capitalised on it. An H. Allen Mills staff member who accompanied Mills on selling trips to Australia recounts this story of one such trip: 'The negotiations (with the Australians) are not going well. I can see H. Allen getting frustrated. Finally, he has enough. He stands up, bangs his fist on the table and says, "Look, you blokes. If we go through with this deal it's going to cost me and my company an arm and a leg." With that, the old boy unstraps his artificial leg, slaps it on the table, and says, "There's the bloody leg, I'll give you the arm later." The Aussies broke up, and if I remember rightly, they were so amused by the whole thing, I think H. Allen got the deal he wanted.'

in Rotorua. In those days, Rotorua looked after its own, and tended to put them above the "johnny-come-latelys", swept in on the flood of new people attracted by the burgeoning forestry industry.

However H. Allen Mills was in that, as in much else, an exception.

Mills was born in the South Taranaki rural community of Rahotu in 1907. He grew up with a tremendous drive, and a family that fostered that ambition. He came from good farming stock and worked hard on his parents' farms while attending New Plymouth High School and Thames High School, and later fulltime on his own farm at Netherton.

In 1933 at the little hilltop church in Pokeno, he married Mary, a nurse he met in Waikato Hospital while convalescing after the first of what was to become a series of accidents—accidents Mills would make light of, but would be a continuing concern to his family.²

It was in Netherton, looking up at the then largely untouched and inaccessible spine of the Coromandel, that he may have garnered ideas of what eventually would become his destiny.

But first there was the Second World War. Mills spent it largely with the RNZAF's ground construction squadron building airstrips in the Pacific Theatre. On his return in 1946, he settled back in the Hauraki Plains.

But no longer as a farmer. This time he capitalised on his wartime construction experience by taking up general contracting for local farmers, most of whom he knew from his pre-war days.



The flight and crash, that cost H. Allen Mills his leg.

It was the right move, the right place and the right time for a man with driving ambition.

In the late 40s, the Lands and Survey Department decided to clear the Coromandel's Whangapoa block in preparation for tree planting. Mills, whose sole equipment at the time seems to have been a crawler tractor and a second-hand Fordson Major tractor, was awarded the clearance contract.

It was exhausting work, which placed considerable pressure on Mills, his wife Mary, and their new family (including son Tony, who was to grow into the family business).

But Whangapoa gave Mills an introduction to major contracts and the capital he needed to increase his plant and go after still bigger contracts. One of these took him to Rotorua.

The Mills family arrived in Rotorua in 1952, soon after their company, H. Allen Mills Limited, was awarded the contract

STEER CASE

One of the most important advances in New Zealand truck-trailer building was the development in the 60s of the self-steer axle.

Under New Zealand law at the time, gross loading was 38 tons, with no more than 8 tons weight permitted on a single axle. The logical step to increase trailer capacity was to increase the number of axles. However, whilst the premise was simple enough, adding more axles at the required 8-foot spacing made the trailers unwieldy and tough on tyres. It also produced a road-hogging stomach-churning (for other road users) turning arc.

The solution was the self-steer.

Like many good ideas in New Zealand truck-trailer building the self-steer has many parents. There are those who claim that Manu Tuanui built the first, there are others who say it was Bill Walker of W.P. Walker in Hamilton. Whatever the case, some credit must be reserved for Russell Law and Neil Peterken of Dometts, who developed the spaced self-steer logging trailer and perfected the technology for the 40 foot flat decks used for carrying containers.

The truth is probably that Bill Walker produced the first, but it was Manu, Russell and Neil who perfected it, and Manu who learnt and earned the most from the technology. In one year, 1971, N.Z. Arc Welding Works exported \$200,000 worth of self-steer axles — the largest export of its type.

Though a perfectionist, Manu didn't always get it right, much to his chagrin and embarrassment. One particular self-steer trailer, built in 1968, illustrates the point. It was built for Mick Newcombe in Rotorua, but before delivering it Manu decided to show it off at a transport show. That show was one of the most important industry events of the year, and a showcase for all the latest and best transport ideas. The venue was a quarry just outside of Huntly and just across a railway line — a railway line that broke the sole steering rod on Manu's self-steering trailer while he was trying to get it to the show. Manu's pride and joy trailer was stranded on the line. Eyewitnesses recall Manu literally jumping up

and down on top of his trailer. Eventually, with Manu's temperature rising and a train coming, a grinning team from Dometts loaned him a steering rod from their showcase self-steer trailer. Manu was able to take his trailer, minus the pride and without a lot of joy either, off the track and into the show.



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to clear land for the Murupara-Kawerau railway project, and just ahead of a road construction contract for the Kaiangaroa Logging Company.

Soon there wasn't much that Allen Mills wasn't involved with, either as a major employer in Rotorua and his logging off Hokianga and in Ohura, or fostering personal interests such as



Clearing the land for the Murupara-Kawerau railway project.

farming (at Reporoa and Kerikeri), flying (patron of the Rotorua Aero Club and owner of a plane) and community service (Chairman of the Rotorua Area Electricity Authority and member of Waikato Hospital Board, among elected roles). He also served on the executive of the NZ Contractors' Federation, and was profiled frequently in the industry media.

From this position of political and financial strength, H. Allen Mills turned his attention and some of his considerable resources to trailer-building—at that point largely the domain of the indefatigable and highly-respected Manu Tuanui.

He set up a specialist engineering company, Mills Engineering Limited, and then hired Neil Peterken away from Domett's as its design engineer, and Quinto Allan from Clyde Engineering as its general manager. Allen Mills' son, Tony, would later be appointed to handle the contracting side of the operation.

For a time, the two companies, Mills Engineering and N.Z. Arc Welding Works worked well enough together. There was plenty of work to be had for both. They even informally segmented the market between them: Manu and his Tui Trailers got the bulk of the logging work, Quinto and Neil tended to go after other trailers. They even appointed one salesman, Laurie Wolf, to represent both companies.

The only hiccup to this informal though formidable relationship was a disagreement over shareholding Neil Peterken had with Allan Mills in 1969, which would result in Peterken leaving Mills Engineering and joining Manu at N.Z. Arc Welding.

But these were peripheries. Much of the interest of this period lies with H. Allen Mills and Manu Tuanui themselves—two strong, often dogmatic men, who shaped trailer building companies in their images.



Clearly there were similarities between Tuanui and Mills—among them the work ethos and their contributions to the community. But the battles they fought in the forests, ports, transport yards and even the media of the Bay of Plenty, for market share of the trailer building are today legendary and were then often entertaining for people who knew both men.

Neil Peterken recalls their battles for media attention, "One week, H.Allen Mills would do something to warrant an article in the local paper, The Daily Post. The following week Manu would announce a new design or contract that would result in him being given equal publication space."³

Nevertheless, right through these battles, the two men maintained considerable respect for each other. They continued to compete fiercely but never lost the wish to communicate.

However, there were by the early 1970s other factors coming into play that would bring an end to the competition and to Manu's direct involvement in the trailer building industry.

The amount of work and the pressure of running two businesses (he also had a crane hire company) began to get to Manu.

Increasingly he was spending time away from work. Usually he was visiting Auckland, but often nobody knew for sure when he would be back. The mantle of production was left largely to his works foreman Eric Meecham and the company's newly-appointed workshop sales manager Neil Peterken.

The beginning of the end of Manu Tuanui's involvement came in 1972 when he was hospitalised after a breakdown.

It was enough for his family. It was time to get out. Manu's wife Marjorie, with Manu's agreement, approached their old nemesis H.Allen Mills with an offer to sell the family's interests in N.Z. Arc Welding Works.

The offer was accepted; the deal was done, and in May 1972

N.Z. Arc Welding Works Ltd became Mills-Tui Trailers Limited. H.Allen Mills appointed Ian Kerr general manager of the new company, and Manu Tuanui was, as he told the Rotorua Daily Post newspaper doing a full page retrospective on his career, "looking for a job."

He was 53 years old.

Men such as Manu Tuanui, Allen Mills, and another pioneer of the industry, Bruce Conway of Conway Engineering, let the thoroughbreds out of the Rotorua trailer-building stable – men such as Neil Peterken, Graeme Kelly, Ian Patchell, Pat Mear and Lyall McGee from the N.Z. Arc Welding/ Mills Engineering camp.

Neil Peterken is an interesting character. He worked for Dave Domett, he worked for Allen Mills, he worked for Manu Tuanui, and he worked for himself. Above all, perhaps, he worked for the industry, and was hugely influential in its' development, particularly from the 70s to the early 90s.

Neil started his working career as a marine engineer. In 1960, he came ashore, got married in Feilding, and joined Domett's as an engineer and designer working with Russell Law. In 1962, the company moved him to Auckland to work with Leo Faulkner, and the two ran Domett's northern operation from what is now the Fairfax Fibreglass site in Takanini. Their responsibilities included the selling and servicing of bottom-dumpers used to build the runway at Mangere Airport. But Neil and Leo both saw the potential of the burgeoning Bay of Plenty. It was to there that they wanted Dave Domett to direct more of his intention and investment. Initially, they were successful, and for a time Domett's had a thriving business building logging and other trailers for the Bay.

They had the potential for more. But not, Neil thought, the

³ The contrast between the two men extended to their choice of cars – something Manu played up to. H.Allen Mills was a great lover and owner of Mercedes Benz cars. By contrast, Manu Tuanui stayed with Audis, which he described as "the poor man's Mercedes."

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presence. He felt the company would be better with a Bay branch, either in Rotorua or Mt Maunganui. When he failed to convince the company of that after the death of Dave Domett, he decided to move to Rotorua on his own.

He had seen an advertisement.

The advertisement, placed by Sheffield & Associates, was for an engineer to help set up the transport side of an established engineering business. The engineering business was Mills Engineering. The man who placed the advertisement was H.Allen Mills.

In 1967, Neil Peterken arrived in Rotorua with enthusiasm, a letter of appointment and promise of a shareholding from H.Allen Mills, and a newly purchased £6000 house in Larcey Road, Lynmore.

What he found was a newly purchased building (ex Maisey Engineering) in Fairy Springs Road, some machinery, and no staff. Also, three months later, a new general manager, Quinto Allan, ex-Clyde Engineering.

Staff and clients were the priority. Neither was a problem. Peterken hired a couple of ex- Maisey Engineering staff and, significantly and contentiously, a number of young Ngapuhi who were down from Whangarei, looking for jobs.⁴

For clients, he was able to attract many from his Domett Truck & Trailer days in Auckland—among them George Moore of Fletcher Transport and Jim Stuart of Winstones. He and Quinto Allan also later hired a salesman called Laurie Wolf, who by agreement (and until eventual disagreement between Quinto and Manu Tuanui) would sell trailers for Mills Engineering and Tui Trailers.

Within two months, the company was up and running and building trailers.

Within 18 months, Neil was moving on.



Neil Peterken - from Marine engineer to trailer builder.

Neil is described as “a bloke with vision”—also “bloody restless”. And it may be a combination of both these factors that led to him leaving Mills Engineering so soon after his arrival. Neil had a vision of where he wanted to take Mills Engineering; he also had the promise of a shareholding in the company. When neither eventuated within the time frame Neil set for himself, he became restless.

In 1969, that restlessness, mixed with frustration, became a volatile mixture that saw Neil pounding on the door of Allen Mills’ Lynmore home at 12.30 in the afternoon demanding an audience. The story goes that the subsequent doorstep conversation

⁴ Though Neil didn’t know it at the time, his hiring of Ngapuhi was to cause considerable problems for the balance of the work force, largely local Te Arawa, who took strong and vocal exception to a northern tribe taking up jobs in the south. Neil remembers coming close to having a violent tribal conflict on his hands. Eventually most of the Ngapuhi he hired returned north. But Neil never forgot the lesson learned—it takes a lot more to build bridges than it does to build trailers.

FLYING HIGH

H. Allen Mills loved flying. He even had his own corporate aircraft for a time, though later he tended to hire planes from the Rotorua Aero Club, of which he was the patron.

However, flying didn't always love H. Allen Mills. He wrote off two planes and had at least three crashes, in one of which he lost a leg. In his last crash, in 1956, he was flying with his son Tony when the aircraft's engine failed over the Mamaku ranges. Allen brought the plane down for an emergency landing in dense bush. Tony remembers the crash and being badly shaken by it but unhurt. Allen Mills also took it in his stride, remarking later to his rescuers that the crash was nothing. He was, he said, more perturbed at ruining a good suit while floundering chest-deep through a swamp on the way to get help—and the fact that the crash smashed his best pipe.

Allen's own on and off-road antics weren't without incident either. Though he had a clean driving record to the end of his life, he was hard on his beloved Mercedes Benz cars. He often used them as farm utility vehicles, including the cartage of stock.

One story, recounted by Neil Peterken, illustrates that perfectly.

On one occasion, Neil recalls, Allen Mills brought one into Mills Engineering. Sitting in the back of the near-new Mercedes, then as now one of most expensive cars in New Zealand, was a donkey. Allen Mills explained that he was transferring it between farms.

The donkey wasn't the problem, though. The problem, Allen Mills, explained was the "small bit" of panel work required on the car.

The man Neil assigned the job saw it differently. What he saw, he told Neil later, was "damn near a write off."

"How did that happen?" the man asked.

"Well," said Allen Mills, drawing himself up and drawing in on his ever-present pipe, "I was chasing a deer on the farm and I ran into a rock."

"You ran into a rock?"

"Yes."

"Using that car to chase a deer?"

"Yes."



"You didn't see it?"

"What? The Deer?"

"The rock."

"No. Never saw it before. Wasn't there yesterday."

With the contracting business in the hands of son Tony and company secretary Ray Bathe-Taylor, and the trailer building side, Mills-Tui Trailers, managed by Ian Kerr, H. Allen Mills eventually stepped back from direct administration of his hard-won empire.

However, he would continue contracting almost to the last. At the age of 85, and in a rest home, he and his mate of 46 years, Winky Savage, could still be found behind the wheels of tractors clearing the Cam block just west of Rotorua.

Hugh Allen Mills died in 1993, peacefully. His ashes were scattered alongside those of his wife Mary's at the little church in Meremere, where six decades earlier they had married.

In 1985 Hugh Allen Mills was appointed Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire for his services to the community. But his services to the trailer building industry are forever recognised in the minds and the memories of those who knew him as one of the great names and characters of New Zealand truck-trailer building.

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was short and anything but sweet. Neil's career with Mills Engineering was finished within minutes of the conversation starting, and by its end, Allen Mills was left standing at his doorstep contemplating a new use for his wooden leg suggested by his erstwhile design engineer.⁵

What followed in Rotorua trailer building was three years of peaceful co-existence. From 1969 to 1972, the giants of the industry, Allen Mills and Manu Tuanui, each quietly ran their respective companies—the latter with the aid of Neil Peterken, hired within hours of his leaving Mills Engineering.

But, like the region itself, there was energy convulsing beneath the surface. New names were starting to appear on the Rotorua scene. Names such as Pat Mear and Lyall McGee, Graeme (Possum) Kelly and Ian Patchell. Names that would come to dominate the industry, and will feature later in this chapter.

The new names were not yet ready to exert their soon to be substantial influence; but the old names, the pioneers, were on the wane. Manu went, selling his family interest in N.Z. Arc Welding Works to Allen Mills in 1972. Mills himself was taking less interest in trailer building; his new amalgamated company, Mills-Tui Trailers, managed astutely in its formative years by Ian Kerr and Ray Bathe-Taylor, would in time get out of the industry entirely to focus on building fire trucks and other emergency tenders.

But Neil was there and he would successfully straddle both camps, helping husband the transition from old to new, and, in one swift move in 1972, he would become the facilitator and the instigator for much of the industry as it is today.

He would begin Road Runner.

The reason Neil Peterken started Road Runner is not hard to understand. He admits he was in an untenable position

⁵ Despite this acrimonious ending to their employment relationship, there was nothing personal in it for either Neil Peterken or Allen Mills. Then and now, Neil Peterken has an enduring respect for H. Allen Mills—calling him one of the true legends of the industry and a great bloke—and Allen Mills is remembered as being just as fulsome in his praise for Neil and the contribution he made to the company.



A convoy of the "sider" type of trailers that Neil Peterken introduced to NZ.

when his then employer Manu Tuanui sold N.Z Arc Welding Works to a previous employer H.Allen Mills. Neil and H. Allen were getting on okay, and Neil was in fact offered a five-year contract to stay at Mill-Tui Trailers, but he knew it was time to move on.

In April 1973, Neil Peterken, ex-Domett and ex-Mills Engineering, handed in his notice to Mills-Tui Trailers and was gone.

For the rest of his time in Rotorua he would be going it alone. Yet, he wasn't alone entirely. Yes, Road Runner Trailers Limited started with no money and no building. But it had the promise of substantial orders from companies such as Direct Transport and Carter Ogi Kokasaka (later Carter Panpac). It had two partners—Kevin O'Neill and Neil Peterken (known respectively as Noddy and Big Ears), a telex registration "Beep" from the Roadrunner cartoon character and from which Neil derived one of his nicknames. And most important, it had nine committed and key staff—mostly from Tuis.

The money and the building problems were soon solved. Waikato-based house transporter, Warwick Johnson, financed the fledgling company into a new purpose-built building on land Warwick owned in, of all places, Allen Mills Road out by Rotorua Airport.

Within three months of its formation, Road Runner was up and running and producing. By Christmas 1973, it was up 15 staff and down one director—Kevin O'Neil, who had moved on.

Road Runner would try anything in the way of trailers and was not adverse to general engineering, either. In 1979, Neil, with a consortium comprising Dave Beckett, Barry Brill, John Franklin, Graham Manson and Bert Godfrey, would even contemplate truck assembly and blueprints for a Road Runner-built heavy-duty truck called the Peterworth.



Dave Beckett (left) & Barry Brill.



Graham Manson, Bert Godfrey & John Franklin.

Chalk, Chips and Changes – The Rotorua Builders

⁴Until now, Neil says he got his fish & chips through "room service" and to some extent that is true. He was good mates with the manager of the (then) DB Redwood Hotel, a former Mercedes Trucks sales manager for Cable Price called Harley Beckett, who organised the hotel's 24-hour kitchen to cook up plates of fish & Chips whenever Neil requested – which was frequently.

⁵The Australians were slow to cotton on to Curtainsiders. Yes, they had the first prototype in the Southern Hemisphere, but they were not impressed with it or the initial testing results for it. For reasons still hard to fathom, the Aussies would be tied to their traditional 'gotta have tarps and gates, mate' way of doing things long after much of the rest of world had adopted curtainsiders. However, some others were more far-sighted. When Peter White bought the bankrupt Freightier Trailer business in Ballarat, he immediately saw the advantage of curtainsiders. He was soon commissioning and importing from Road Runner about seven Tautliner sets a week. Later, Peter would try to patent the idea himself.

But most of the early work was logging trailers, many of them off-highway for Forest Products, which would in time put Neil and Road Runner directly in competition with Ian Patchell and Ian's burgeoning new company, Patchell Industries.

Neil remembers long days that would stretch seamlessly into the next.

Pat Mear, then a fitter-welder and one of the first to join Neil from Mills-Tui, remembers them, too. He also remembers chalk designs on the floor, extant from the Manu days, with the instruction from Neil to "build the bloody thing", and the hours Neil would devote to overseas and local transport magazines trying to get a handle on "the next big thing".

Pat remembers, as well, the fish & chips. The seemingly miraculous ability Neil Peterken had to treat his exhausted staff to a pile of fish & chips, regardless of the hour. The mystery of where Neil got them was never solved.⁶

But the long hours were indicative of Road Runner and its team ethos. The Road Runner team was, in time, producing as many as 40 trailers a year, and even more later on when it moved into curtainsiders and B-trains (Neil calculates that, by 1987, Road Runner was doing a trailer a day).

Neil is proud of those early days, proud of the production, proud of the men who produced. He has good reason for that pride, particularly for the latter. A Road Runner staff list, updated every year of the company's 18-year operation, reads as an early roll call of future leading lights of the transport industry. Among them: Neil Wylie, Lyall McGee, Graham Packer, Pat Mear, Marty Rosenberg, Dave Field, Craig Gordon, Kevin Jackson, Dick Parker, Ross Bell and Mike Dawson.

The company expanded rapidly. Patchell Industries and Kraft Engineering were providing Road Runner with its only real



The Peterworth roller shutter door.

Rotorua-based competition, and that was largely in logging. By the late 70s, Neil Peterken was keen to move his company into other areas. He was spending more time building tippers, transporters, side-lifter container cranes, self-steering semis, hoists and bodies. And of course hunting for the next big thing. In 1981 he found it.

The idea came to Neil by way of Dan Lambert, who worked for Trevor Farmer at Freightways. Dan read about an idea from England that revolutionised the loading and unloading of dry



Names that would impact on the trailer-building industry:

Ross Bell, Lyall McGeet, Neil Peterken, Garry Dunston, Pat Mear, Ron Norman, Murray Lough, Dick Parker, Dick Broad.

goods in Europe. He believed the idea had an application in New Zealand. It could be big. Very big.

Dan approached Trevor, who in turn suggested that Neil and Dan get together. And quickly. The Australians were already testing a prototype that was Australian-built from plans sent from England. There were rumblings that the English makers were about to appoint a New Zealand agency from the South Island. Within days of their first meeting, Neil and Dan were in Australia evaluating the prototype commissioned by Lindsay Fox. Soon after, Neil was in England securing the New Zealand agency from the original English developers, Boalloy Engineering, makers of Tautliner.⁷

Soon after this hurried round of meetings, Trevor Farmer placed

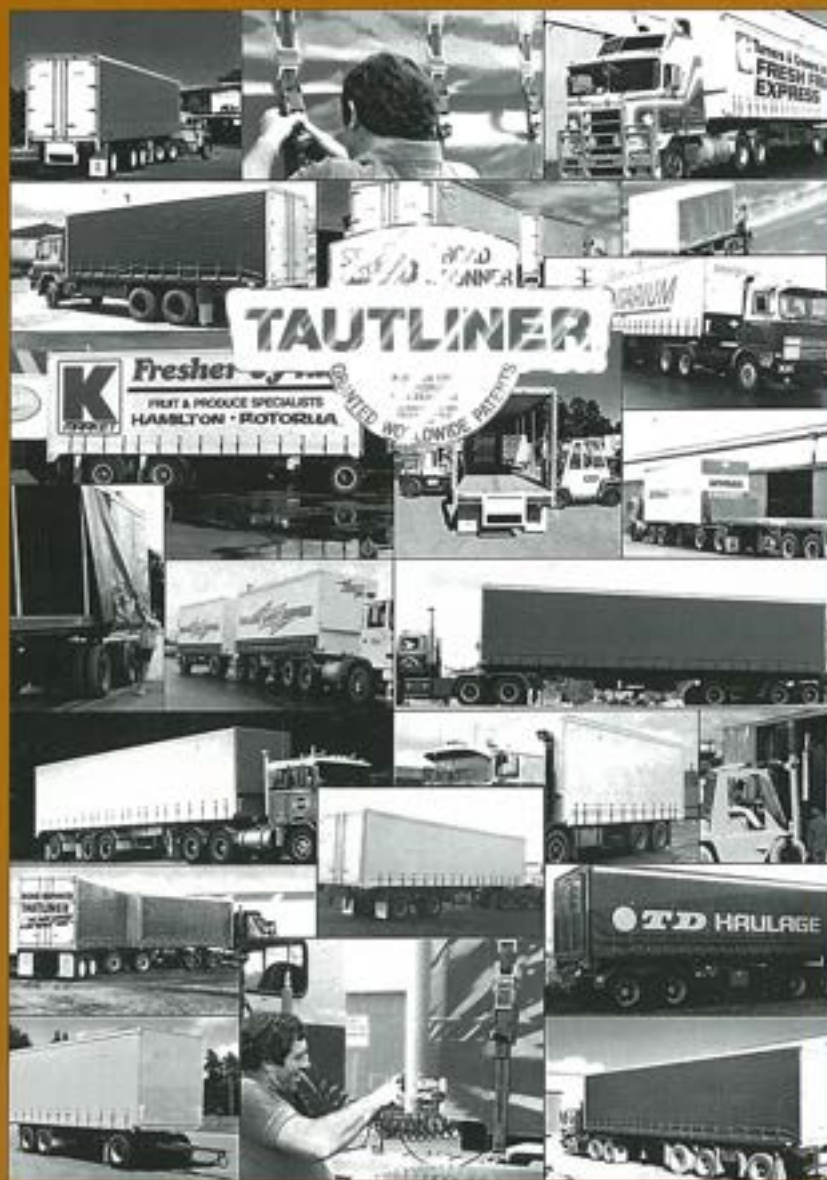
an order for 50 of the new (to New Zealand) concept in trailers.

The age of the curtainsider in New Zealand had begun.

That 1981 order of 50 curtainsiders for Freightways put Road Runner on an entirely new road.

Much of the order was met entirely by Road Runner, who built the trailers and imported and fitted the curtains. However, it soon became more profitable for the company to manufacture the curtains locally, and not only for Road Runner trailers. They soon began making them for other trailer builders.

One such accommodation with Domett Fruehauf led to a strategic partnership between the two companies. Domett Fruehauf helped finance Road Runner into extending the curtainsider business, and Domett Fruehauf's managing director Gary Domett was



CURTAINS FOR NEW ZEALAND.

Within months of Road Runner building the first New Zealand curtainsider under license to Boalloy Engineering and the Tautliner™ branding, tarpaulins in road transport were largely in the past. The New Zealand trucking industry was quicker to embrace and adapt to curtainsiders than that of any other country.

One of the advantages curtainsiders have over tarpaulins is speed. Peterken knew it, and with willing accomplice Pat Mear in tow, he set out to prove it. Truck and transport shows in the early 80s featured a popular competition, sponsored by tarpaulin manufacturer Structurflex, to find the driver who could throw and fit a tarpaulin over a 40-foot load in the quickest time. Whilst far faster times were certainly registered, the average was about 45 minutes.

So Peterken, to prove a point, ran his own competition at the same truck shows, often on the same day as the Structurflex competition. He was looking for the quickest time for one man to fasten and secure a 40-foot curtainsider load. The record was 1 minute 39 seconds.

Predictably, the competition of competitions didn't last long. After tarpaulins were replaced by curtains—some manufactured by Structurflex, it became academic anyway.

For Road Runner and Neil Peterken, curtainsiders were an outstanding success. Tautliner and various variations on the theme—Insuliner, Cooliner, Chipliner, Localiner, and the immensely practical Multiliner—would soon form the bulk of Road Runner's business.

appointed to the board of Road Runner. In the late 80s and early 90s, the Road Runner/ Domett Fruehauf connection would become even closer. We will come to that later.

But in the early 80s, curtainsiders were almost solely Neil Peterken's business. It was big business, and about to get even bigger.

In 1980, a year before Neil started working on the British idea of curtainsiders, he had seen on a trip to Toronto a Canadian configuration—still experimental— that he thought would have an application in New Zealand.

Semitrailers were not new to New Zealand at that time (though the term was previously they were called "artics"), but the idea of

hooking two of them together was new. Two semis connected by a fifth wheel—a configuration soon to be known as the B-train—was untried, untested, and possibly illegal in New Zealand.

But it was produced in Canada. It was working there and, Neil believed, should work here.

That's what he told John Ramsay, anyway.

John Ramsay would eventually own a couple of freezing works, and property interests, including Pakatoa Island. But in the early 80s, his main businesses interests were a couple of deer farms and a pole and post yard, at Rerewhakaaitu just south of Rotorua.

It was the pole and post yard and John Ramsey's desire to



Dan Lambert at the forefront of the development of the curtainsider in NZ.

HANGERS-ON AND WAYWARD TRAILERS –REMEMBERING ROCHE

In the mid 80s, the New Zealand transport industry had more than its 15 minutes of fame through a series of 60-minute TV dramas called *Roche*. Whilst the programme was much maligned by the industry at the time for its portrayal of truckies as “ill-disciplined cowboys”, some within the industry had fun with it. None more so than Rotorua trailer builders.

The B-train curtainsider towed by the eponymous Roche was built and supplied by Road Runner. Road Runner also supplied much of the technical expertise for the programme in the form of Dick Parker, who was seconded to the programme as both technical advisor and stunt driver.

Dick, who is now Roadmaster's Rotorua sales manager, remembers time on the set as being a mix of mostly boredom interspersed with rare moments of high excitement and even titillation. The latter came in the form of some attractive sylvite actresses whom the programme makers deemed ubiquitous accoutrements of the trucking industry. The high excitement included the stunt work and the chance for Dick to put rigs into situations and confusions that would not be (legally) possible in real life.

It was some of those situations, so expertly executed by Dick, which may have led to the “cowboy” criticism. But it is also true that some of the storylines used on the programme were suggested by the industry itself.

For example, there was one storyline based on a legendary tale of a truck driver called Colin Holthan. Colin was a big man and a hard worker—he had a day job driving trucks for Jim Middleton, and a night job for Ash Norris, taking timber from Rotorua to Auckland—a load that wasn't legal in that time of forty-mile road cartage limitations. Ngaruawahia, where a traffic officer stopped Colin and his load of timber at 2:00 in the morning, is somewhat farther than 40 miles from Rotorua. That may account for this terse exchange between officer and driver:

Officer: What's your load?

Colin: Dunno.

Officer: You dunno—don't know?

Colin: Nope. I'm just the bloody driver.

Officer: Well, I am going to have a look.

Colin: Suit your bloody self.

What happens next is known. Why it is happened is not.

We perhaps should just give Colin the benefit of the doubt and say that he genuinely thought the officer had finished his inspection and was not still under the tarpaulin when Colin pulled out of the lay-by and resumed his trip north.

Whatever the case, what resulted was an unanticipated terrifying trip to Auckland for the officer, hanging on for grim death to the tarpaulin in the back. A trip that ended only when Colin—always one for the road rules—stopped for traffic lights at the top of the Bombay Hills. That story found itself on *Roche*.

Another *Roche* storyline came directly from the programme makers' thirst for ideas.



Dick Parker, left, would-be movie star.

The producers decided that they would shout local trucking identities, including Neil Peterken and Stan Williamson, a few beers at the DB Redwood Hotel in exchange for some "real life" yarns and anecdotes that could be used in scripts. During the session, it transpired that the programme makers had never been in a truck.

"Right," said Neil Peterken. "We'll fix that."

And so it was that various producers, cameramen, and writers all piled into the cab of a Geany Transport Kenworth, with Neil Peterken at the wheel and a "Bailey Bridge" three-axle semi-trailer on the back.

But the trailer didn't stay on the back for long. Driving at speed along Vaughans Road, Neil looked in his rear view mirror to see to his horror that the trailer had disconnected from the turntable and was travelling independently at the same pace as the tractor unit. Neil braked, but the trailer veered to the left and was looming up beside the slowing cab. Neil turned to the oblivious programme makers and said a lot more calmly than he felt: "If you look to your left, you'll see that we are about to be passed by a trailer that looks very much like the one we had on the back."

The trailer came to rest on the verge and no damage was done, but the incident was reproduced later—under much more controlled conditions—in Roche. Even so, when the incident was broadcast, it was cited as yet another example of the programme being "far-fetched and unbelievable".

get more bucks for his truck carting those poles, that would result in a chat with Neil Peterken and a pivotal role for John Ramsey in the history of truck-trailer manufacturing in New Zealand.

The chat was about B-trains. Neil had been to Canada and seen the experimental models

in action. He knew that John was about to travel to Canada, and he suggested that he check out the B-train concept while he was there.

John did, and he liked what he saw.

When John returned to Rerewhakaaitu, he called Neil at Road Runner. As Neil now recalls it, the conversation went something like this:

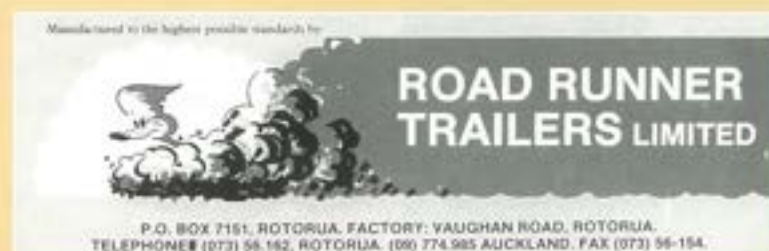
John: Got to have one of those.

Neil: Well, the way the law is the moment, it may be okay. I just don't know. But what we could do is build one that complies with the forward length laws. Then show them it. See how it goes. Are you prepared to do that?

John: Yeah. Let's give it a go.

So, the first B-train in New Zealand was built in about 1980 to carry posts for John Ramsey. It wasn't a great affair—basically a chassis with two chassis rails, on which the poles were winched off the back and stacked cross-ways, with two stakes at the back holding them in place.

But it was the coupling mechanism—the 5th wheel that was the big advance, and the legality of using it to couple-up a second trailer was still under question.



Road Runner Trailers Limited logo.

Chalk, Chips and Changes – The Rotorua Builders

⁴ Ian and Graeme are contributing to a third generation, as well—both have family members working for them. Ian has his sons, Don and Colin, and Graeme has two of three daughters, Letitia and Annette, at Kraft Engineering.

⁵ Ian didn't have a lot to work on with this contract. The machine comprised an intricate vibrating table and multiple casting boxes, but all Humphreys could supply was a verbal description and a photo of an Italian version. Ian successfully designed and manufactured a New Zealand equivalent, and it became the cornerstone of a relationship Patchell and Firth have to this day.

Neil asked the question of the Ministry of Transport in Wellington, who offered to send two representatives to check out the new double trailer concept. Meanwhile, Neil busied himself learning to manoeuvre the trailers. He says he got that aspect "sorted" just before the MOT representatives arrived at Road Runner, and he put a good show for them on the company's forecourt. After some discussion about how much the B-train would track-in and possible contravention of the then forward length laws, the representatives pronounced themselves satisfied. The concept had MOT approval, and John Ramsey had his B-train—the first in New Zealand and one of the first in the world. Within a year, Neil Peterken set about marrying the two innovative concepts—B-trains and curtainsiders. The face of trailer building was to change yet again.

Ian Patchell, by rights, should have been relieved to see Road Runner get out of logging trailers. Except that Ian didn't much care then, or care too much now, about what happens outside his company.

Graeme Kelly is used to change. He has been pretty instrumental in initiating a few himself, particularly in the design of multi-purpose trailers. In that respect, he is widely acknowledged among his peers as one of the industry's true innovators.

Today, Ian Patchell of Ian Patchell Industries, and Graeme Kelly of Kraft Engineering, dominate the building of logging trailers in New Zealand. Whilst both acknowledged during interviews for this book that there is plenty of work to go around and they have respect for each other, they compete fiercely—not only for building contracts, but also to outdo each other in innovations and manufacturing quality.

As trailer builders, particularly builders of logging trailers, they inherited the mantles vacated by Manu Tuanui (for whom both

Graeme and Ian worked for a time) and H. Allen Mills.

Ian Patchell, Graeme Kelly, and Neil Peterken briefly, were the second generation of Rotorua logging trailer builders.⁶

Ian and Graeme are of an age—and not only in years. Both entered the industry about the same time and through much the same process. Both worked at Kinleith, where both bucked the entrenched union-dominated systems in place at the time. Both worked for Quinto Allan at Mills Engineering, though at different times, and both had a hunger to outdo the competition and do his own thing.

For Graeme Kelly, doing his own thing often meant taking off and going hunting. That's where he earned one of two nicknames, Possum. (The other is "Kraftie", though the spelling of that is often dependent on the user's experience of dealing with Graeme.)

For **Ian Patchell**, his own thing was then, and is still today, his company.

For him, the business of trailer building started in 1972, when he rented the View Road property he now owns off local wool buyer Harvey J. Hornblow. Hornblow, whom Ian had known since childhood, gave the budding engineer three months grace on the rent, and Firth Industries, specifically its Rotorua director at the time Peter Humphreys, weighed in with the loan of Hiab lifting equipment. Humphries also supplied the fledgling company with one of its first contracts—building a machine to automate the manufacture of concrete building piles.⁷

One of Ian's earliest trailer building contracts—and historically still one of his most challenging—was the building of 100-tonne off-highway logging trailers for G.A. Perfect Transport of Kawerau.

The late Geoff Perfect, who passed away in 2004, took a hand's



The first "B" Train in NZ built for John Ramsey.



Patchell two axle self steer built for TNL.



Patchell two axle self steer built for Geoff Perfect.

on approach and personal interest in the design and building of his trailers. He remembered Ian Patchell as one of the most receptive of the trailer builders he worked with. Right up to Geoff's death the two men came across each other often. In fact, Geoff was not adverse to wandering down to Patchell's View Road plant and sharing a few thoughts with Ian.

That long-time client/builder relationship and the respect the two had for each was strong. The difference in later years, recalled Geoff, was that Ian never gave him the "hurry up" he once did. "He (Ian) was a tough man, a hard man in the old days. Maybe he's getting soft-or I'm getting old."

Nevertheless, the work Geoff Perfect and Ian Patchell did to "perfect" the design of logging trailers—particularly weight and stress issues—advanced both the industry and Patchell's reputation for quality.

Despite that, trailer building remained very much a secondary line during the 70s and 80s. The emphasis was on general forestry and earth moving equipment. Despite doing good work for logging contractors and good mates such as Geoff Perfect, Ian Patchell struggled to get into the major contracts.

Contracts were a matter of contacts—and few trailer builders at that time had more contacts than Neil Peterken. It was Neil's contact with the Carter family that led to Mills-Tui securing one of the larger trailer building contracts of 1972/73—18 dollies for Carter Pan-Pac, and in 1974, a Carter Pan-Pac contract for 47 two - and three-axle trailers to be built by his own company, Road Runner.

In 1979, a third Carter Pan-Pac contract was on offer. By this time, Neil Peterken's Road Runner had well and truly diversified, and Ian Patchell was ready to step in—almost. He lacked the manpower to handle a major trailer building contract, but what he had was mates from his days at Kinleith—mates still at Kinleith, but not adverse to doing a bit of moonlighting for Ian.

With their offer of help, he went after the third Carter Pan-Pac contract and got it. He was now into trailer building big time.

And at that time, the company also acquired a new name befitting its new size and status. Ian explains the reasoning: "Ian Patchell Ltd had to go. I believed that professional companies didn't call themselves limited liability companies, so I just called us Patchell Industries. It sounded more professional and was more in line with the larger companies we were dealing with—the likes of Caterpillar."

Through the 80s, a sizeable proportion of the newly-named company's business was with Caterpillar, designing and building attachments to convert Caterpillar 25-tonne excavators into 30-tonne log loaders. That served companies well until the end of the 80s, when Caterpillar bought Mitsubishi, and with it company access to Mitsubishi's 30-tonne excavators.

Undaunted, Ian Patchell simply upscaled his production of logging trailers and truck equipment. By the end of the 90s, trailer manufacturing accounted for over half of the company's business. It's now around 70%.

In keeping with many trailer builders from the 70s and earlier, Ian Patchell's beginnings as a trailer builder were inauspicious and hardly sophisticated. Like Manu Tuanui and others before him, he was a "chalk merchant" —outlining his design on the workshop floor and then "building the bugger" on top.

It seems hardly relevant, and even something of a paradox, that despite his staunch journeyman reputation, Ian and his company should have one of the largest and best equipped design teams in the business—seven designers with cutting-edge tools such as SolidWorks and Nastran software, and that Patchell Industries should be one of the few manufacturers to be granted a Deed of Appointment as a self-certifying engineer/manufacturer.



Ian Patchell.

Yet it is not irrelevant. It is symptomatic—symptomatic of one man's on-going quest, shared by the transport industry, for better trailers. Ian Patchell has no compunction about embracing new technology if it results in a better trailer. That is, after all, the business he is in.

The other man who inherited much of the Tuanui-Mills mantle is **Graeme "Possum" Kelly**. Graeme started off in the business as a goffer for Neil Peterken and Quinto Allan at Mills Engineering following a stint as a welder at Kinleith and a driver for various contractors around the Bay of Plenty.

Those early jobs testify to a work ethos that drives him to this day. Impatient to start, a grossly underage Graeme Kelly lied about his age to get his job at Kinleith. And he was still barely of legal driving age when racking up experience driving trucks and spreaders for the likes of Noel Kelly and Jim Middleton. It was while working for Noel that Graeme learnt to weld, modifying 2-axle and 4-wheelers to 4-wheel drives.

But it was his time with Neil Peterken, Quinto Allan, and Bill Vercoe at Mills Engineering in 1968 that would introduce him to trailer building—something he would carry on when he shifted to Australia later that year to build trailers for Freighter Industries.

At the turn of the decade, Graeme Kelly was back in Rotorua, where he joined Manu Tuanui's N.Z. Arc Welding (Tui Trailers). He was still there in 1972, when the company was sold to Allen Mills and it became Mills-Tui Trailers, but he didn't stay for long after that.

The next five or six years for Graeme Kelly were spent largely in the wilderness—literally and figuratively. He returned to Kinleith for a stint, worked for a time for Ian Patchell, and then for Graeme Manson. But a fair amount of his time—most winters—was spent hunting.

And that's where he acquired his nickname—Possum.

By 1978, he had enough of his itinerant lifestyle and working for others. He decided to ply his skill as a welder and engineer and go it alone.

He started small, as Graeme Kelly Engineering, doing general jobbing work. But he also managed a couple of good commissions setting up trucks for Robin Moore and Brian Stanaway, and his business and his reputation for quality work grew.

When the council condemned the shed he was working out of, Graeme shifted his business to Rotorua Brake Services, a company owned by Mick Kelly. Mick was not a relative, and to avoid any confusion and a possible conflict of engineering work, Graeme decided to change the name of his company. The name he chose was from his days at Kinleith and his liking for a Swedish word used in the manufacture of paper and meaning "strong" in English. Graeme Kelly Engineering became Kraft Engineering, and Graeme Kelly became Kraftie.

That was in 1984, a year in which there would be another significant development—Kraft Engineering's first trailer, built for Warwick Wilshier. To that point, much of Graeme's work was manufacturing and servicing general logging gear. He had not tried his hand at a full trailer—not on his own account. When Warwick Wilshier approached him with an order for a trailer, Graeme's response was typically laconic: "If you're that brave, I'll give it a go."

And he did.

That first trailer was stock standard. Good quality, good enough to lead to further contracts and the attention of Pacific Haulage and a man called Mike Lambert, but nothing special.

"Special" would come later. And Mike Lambert would have a lot to do with that.

The history of truck-trailer manufacturing in New Zealand is of one

of partnerships. Many transport operators had—and continue to have—their favourite trailer builders, and they tend to stick by them. One of the most resilient and productive of those partnerships is between Mike Lambert of the Lambert Group and Graeme Kelly. It has worked for both men, for their respective companies, and it has worked for the trailer building industry.

In Graeme Kelly, Mike Lambert found a trailer builder who had



Graeme "Possum" Kelly (right) working hard at a local truck show supported by logging entity Colin Sargesson.



Mike Lambert actively fostered innovation with "Kraftie".

the time, the plant, the capacity and, above all, the inclination to join Lambert in his search for "the different and the better." There were other, more established, builders back in the early 80s, such as Ian Patchell, Evans Trailers, and of course, Neil Peterken at Road Runner, but all were by that time focusing on basic production with the odd customisation thrown in. None had the inclination or the need for experimentation. Graeme Kelly did, and in Mike Lambert he had a customer who would actively and financially foster it.

We'll come to the ideas they two of them came up with later, and they are interesting in themselves, but the way in which they came up with the ideas is significant. It says something about the men, their relationship, and the way the industry worked until very recently. Most of the innovations the Kelly/Lambert partnership produced were the result of "a couple of blokes" having a beer at the end of the day (Graeme Kelly still reckons his chief designer is a bloke called 'Mac Gold'), or the two returning from a forestry visit in a car or one of Lambert's trucks. Something they had just seen would elicit the comment: "There must be a better way of doing that." A mutual nodding of heads would suggest agreement and it was over to Graeme Kelly to find it.

Usually he could. Usually the same night.

Mike's view, which gave Graeme his impetus, was that if something Graeme came up with didn't work, they could always turn it into something else—something that did work.

That latitude and that faith would produce such groundbreaking innovations as the Kraftie Loader— the first folding trailer in New Zealand – and a whole swag of versatile back-load configurations, including units that would carry no fewer than three different types of loads on a round trip.

They made him quite a few friends and admirers among

transport operators.

Graeme Kelly is proud of what he has produced for the industry—a lot prouder than he lets on. There is no doubt he broke significant ground, but he remains largely self-deprecating. "Designing these things wasn't hard," he says. "Yeah, it was a bloody big learning curve—still is, but you get a guy like Mike Lambert fire the bullets and tells us there has to be a better way to do something, and even if there isn't, we can always turn it into something else—and you have a good partnership between an operator and his builder. No doubt about that."

Meanwhile, in 1987, back over at HAllen Mills Road, Neil Peterken and Road Runner were on the move to Vaughans Road. There were other changes, as well. Neil and his partner Gary Domett were fiddling with the idea of a mega-merger—Road Runner Rotorua and Bulls, with Domett Fruehauf in Feilding and the Mount. The idea was to provide greater utilisation of plant and reduce costs. At the back of that thought, though, was that the combined company would become indisputably the biggest trailer builder in New Zealand. They even came up with an all-embracing title for the company—Roadcorp.

The idea came to fruition, and for the first year of the operations, the combined company, still trading under separate brands, was on-line to fulfil the success predictions of its partners.

However, one of the companies in the Roadcorp merger, Domett Fruehauf, had another interested party, one with a significant financial interest: Bryan was less enamoured in the merger than his partner Gary Domett. Roadcorp would last less than a year.

The companies then returned to their competitive states. However, Gary Domett remained a partner in both Domett Fruehauf and Road Runner.

That wasn't sitting well with Bryan Lindsay, either.

Chalk, Chips and Changes – The Rotorua Builders



Neil Peterken, Gary Domett and Bryan Lindsay, Co-directors of Roadcorp.

Memories of bitter battles die hard. Bryan Lindsay's Domett Fruehauf and Neil Peterken's Road Runner had fought some in the past, and they were now being fought again. It was now, to say the least, an uneasy alliance. The ultimatum went out from Feilding: "Get Peterken to buy us out of our shares in Road Runner."

Neil was invited to make an offer. He did. An offer that he, who started the company, still says was a fair, one based on consultants' advice. Fair or not, it certainly wasn't accepted. Gary Domett was of the view that the Domett slice of the Road Runner business was worth much more than Neil was offering. There may be justification for both views, but Peterken at least had on his side that this was 1991 and not a great year for the trailer

building business. Orders were down, and the immediate prospects didn't look good. Neil decided that he didn't have the will, the means, or the forecasts he needed to justify an increased offer.

Then, in a classic case of reverse psychology, he suggested that if Gary thought that was the price Road Runner was worth, then that was the price he, Neil Peterken, would accept to be bought out.

The deal was done. And in March 1991, Neil Peterken and the company he started 18 years earlier parted company. Neil was out on his own. So was Road Runner.

What Road Runner did retain, at least for a while, was a core unit of top staff including Lyall McGee, Pat Mear and Bill Lacey, Richard Lee and Mike Dawson. What they now got was a new managing director—Bryan Lindsay. Within four weeks, Mike Dawson left, and the exodus began. Within months of the change of ownership, there came a groundswell shift akin, in the trailer building industry, to the rolling thermal underbelly of Rotorua—Lyall McGee, Pat Mear and Bill Lacey handed in their resignations.

Much of the heart was ripped out of Road Runner. Roadmaster was born.

Road Runner did continue. The much-respected Dave Metcalfe was brought in to manage the Rotorua operation, but events in Feilding were again dictating the future of the Rotorua company. Gary Domett was gone, bought out by Bryan Lindsay. Soon the Feilding company started by Gary's father, Dave Domett, almost half a century before and built through those nights at the Denbigh and the Empire; the company that gave us industry legends such as Russell Law, Dave Snell, Leo Faulkner, Dave Gillies, Brian McDonald, Neil Peterken, Robbie Hill (and brother Roger) and Peter Mathers, was gone too.

Dometts in Feilding was sold to Milloy, Reid and Wong, an Auckland-based merchant banker. Within a year of that, the

Rotorua operation, the erstwhile Road Runner, now called Fruehauf Pacific Limited, was closed as well.

As for Neil Peterken...he continued to run Road Runner in Bulls with Don Ward. But his heart was no longer in it. He had had enough of trailer building, and in 1994, he moved to Auckland to retire. However, under pressure from his old Australian mate Martin Hammel, he was persuaded to come back into the business and start Hamelex in New Zealand, with Barry Brill as a partner. It would be Neil Peterken's trailer swan song.

Neil and Barry ran the company out of its Albany base until 1998, when Hamelex Holdings bought out Barry Brill's shareholding. Neil continued with his new group of shareholders and directors, but financial pressures built up for the company, and by mid-2000 it was in liquidation.

Neil Peterken was out of the trailer building business.

Today, Neil Peterken looks back at his time in the industry with regret, particularly at how his association with it ended. But of the earlier times, he has no regrets. What he has is a great deal of appreciation of, and for, those he worked with: men of Road Runner and Roadmaster still in the business today, and those from even earlier—those of the Domett days.

Legends of the industry.

And the name of Neil Peterken, rightly for his contribution and innovation, deserves to be counted among them.

You have to respect them. Perhaps even like them. Most people in the industry—particularly suppliers—obviously did back in 1991. And still do. The founders and current directors of Roadmaster Trailers Limited have always shown a lot of guts, and despite (or perhaps because of) for the most part quietly going about their business, they have won and kept a good-few friends. They certainly needed friends back in December 1991



The late Don Ward, Manager Road Runner Bulls.

when they started Roadmaster. This is why...

He is a big bloke and he doesn't—as they say—suffer fools gladly. He won't be mucked around. **Pat Mear**, erstwhile accounts clerk, head salesman, general manager, more latterly plant manager and goodness knows what else for Road Runner, was being mucked around at Fruehauf Pacific. He had, as he colourfully recalls it, "a gutsful." He wasn't alone. Two other long-term Road Runner employees, Lyall McGee and Bill Lacey, were also feeling the strain, and another, Ross Bell, had already left the company to pursue interests outside trailer building. But it was particularly Pat who was becoming frustrated. He



THE DAY THE EARTH MOVED FOR PAT MEAR

To be fair, he wasn't so much an accident waiting to happen. It was more a case of accidents waiting for Pat Mear to happen.

Pat had more than his fair share of them in various workshops in his early days. One of the most serious occurred at Mills-Tui. This is how Pat reluctantly remembers it:

"We were working on a six wheeler, with a jack underneath the centre jacking it up. All the wheels except one were off, and I was kneeling underneath with my legs just under one of the beams when a guy took the last wheel off. Of course, it was a self-centering jack, and the tension was too much. There was a bit of a crack and a jerk underneath the wheel, and that was enough to have the whole three tons come down on top of me. They shoved the jack under to get it off me again, but in exactly the same place, and it fell off again – hit me twice. Everything was a bit of a blur after that. They got it off and carted me off to a hospital."

Maybe because of that incident (and others), Pat is particularly safety conscious when it comes to other people. He recalls an incident when he and his fellow Roadmaster directors decided to invest in a repair bay. "We were doing repair work, but the conditions weren't the best. We weren't really ready for it. We were working under tarpaulins. Anyway, I'm walking past this repair area, and it's hosing down with rain, and I see the earth start to slide and move beneath these blokes and the trailer they're working on. That was it. I said 'bugger this', so we went and invested in a concrete floor...and a proper roof."

Pat Mear (Roadmaster Trailers) and Brian McDonald (Fairfax Industries)

remembers a day when he, as plant manager, was hauled over the coals for going out and buying a \$3000 drill. Pat doesn't take kindly to public humiliation. That night, he went home to his wife and said: "I'm stuffed with it. I think we should think about starting up on our own."

Not entirely on their own. Next day, Pat Mear put his go-it-alone idea to Lyall, whom Pat thought could fill the role as design engineer. Lyall agreed but suggested they would also need a workshop forman-that brought in Bill. As for the financial side? Ross Bell, an old mate and qualified accountant, could do that. The four talked, made plans and came up with ideas, which included re-mortgaging homes and taking a 25% stake each.

But what about customers? They would talk to three of four truckies. Just get an idea, of the interest in the thought of a new trailer builder. Just an idea. Just a thought. Nothing firm. Nothing to spread about. Just something to talk about.

Unfortunately for the frustrated four, one of the truckies did talk... to the management of Fruehauf Pacific. That day, all hell broke loose, as Pat Mear puts it. "My feet didn't touch the ground."

Pat was out. Out of Fruehauf Pacific. Out of a job.

But he wasn't out of friends. Same day as he was fired, Pat Mear went to Lyall McGee, Bill Lacey and Ross Bell: "Listen, I am out of a job-let's do it."

They did.

On December 1, they found a building in Geddes Road and "ripped into it."

And that's where friends come in. It pays to have them in the trailer business.

First, Ross Bell and their old boss Neil Peterken bought the Geddes Road building and leased it back to Roadmaster. Next came the staff. Almost immediately, twelve employees from

Road Runner made the journey across town to join Roadmaster, bringing their tools with them.¹⁰

Orders were not a problem either. Roadmaster already had some of those. But parts to complete those contracts were. Roadmaster simply didn't have them, or the money to pay for them.

All Pat Mear had was a good suit and a few contacts in Auckland. He donned the first and went off to see the second.

"The first two people I saw," Pat recalls, "were Ken Mahaffie and Fred Radford of Transport Specialties. Ken was one of the true gentlemen of the business. First thing he did when I arrived was sit me down and ask me what he could do for me. Nothing else-just that: 'what can I do for you? What do you need?'"

"I looked him in the eye and I said, 'What I need is 60 days credit.'" Pat Mear and Roadmaster got it. Same day service from Ken Mahaffie, Fred Radford and Transport Specialties. The next day, Pat was off to see Ian Patterson at Bridgestone. After all, the new trailers needed to be shod. Same request, same response. And the same result at Pat Mear's third and final "blind trust" Auckland visit, to Steel and Tube, and later at BOC Gases.

The major suppliers were coming to the party. Roadmaster was up and running.

Their first job at Roadmaster was lengthening a wheelbase for Fairfax Fibreglass. Their first trailers were two tipping trailers for Freight and Bulk Limited in Taranaki. Those trailers were completed and delivered inside of four weeks.

But it was another trailer-a five-axle B-Train for Reliable Haulage in Bombay-that showed, to an unusual degree, the support the new company and particularly its partners were capable of generating. Pat Mear: "A bloke called Ian Hobbs at Reliable Haulage came in and said 'I want this trailer, and you

¹⁰ Interestingly, Pat's son, Jeff (now national sales and marketing manager for Roadmaster), wasn't among them. He wanted to be, but Fruehauf Pacific made him and Lyall McGee work out their notices. For the first few weeks of Roadmaster, Jeff and Lyall would put in a day shift for Fruehauf - not that they were given any work to do - and surreptitiously work a night shift at Roadmaster. Jeff finally joined Roadmaster full-time, as a salesman, at the end of 1991. Ten of the original twelve staff who came over from Fruehauf are still at Roadmaster today.



Transport Specialties founder Ray Wilson & General Manager Ken Mahaffie.

obviously need some money', so he gave us \$10,000 upfront and said go and build me this trailer. So we did. It was people like that who helped get us going."

And they were going. In its first year, Roadmaster built 28 trailers. In their second year, they built more than 50—the directors are these days a bit hazy on exact numbers. A year after, they were into the 70s. Currently, the company builds around 130 trailers a year.

In terms of innovation, Roadmaster has perhaps not been as spectacular as some other companies and individuals. They have not set out to be. What they have offered the transport

industry is something else—"a bloody good product", as one transport operator described Roadmaster's strength for this book.

And they have built their trailers well, right from the start. The twelve original staff that took the risk of going from Fruehauf Pacific to Roadmaster were probably among Fruehauf's best. Perhaps among the best in New Zealand. They weren't flashy—nor, admittedly, was Roadmaster then or now but they know how to build trailers, and in the early days they were so good at it that they didn't even need a drawing.

They have had hard times—Lyll reckons the years 1996 to 1997 were among the worst. They have made strategic decisions that didn't pan out. A fabrication and assembly plant in Palmerston North, which was supposed to give better access for a major customer, Trailer Rentals, was hit by a declining economy. Demand dropped, and the plant was closed after less than two years. Similarly a repair plant in Hastings.

The present partners of Roadmaster—Pat Mear, Lyall McGee, and Ross Bell (Bill Lacey, no longer a director, still puts in the hours working in the company's repair bay) will admit to having "done some dumb things", but they have no regrets. "The first eight years were hard graft," says Pat, "but we're doing okay now. We're building trailers. Doing what we do best."

Roadmaster is into its second decade of operation.

It began as one of the most competitive trailer building arenas in New Zealand. Also one of the most incestuous. That's probably why Rotorua has produced some of the most colourful characters and yarns in the industry.

Rotorua trailer building has also contributed more than its fair share of industry successes. And victims. Certainly it is not an easy territory in which to compete.

Not insignificant, perhaps, is the fact that the companies that are succeeding down there today are all home grown. It just never seemed to work out for "outsiders" such as Domett and Fruehauf. Even an outsider such as Neil Peterken, who did make a success in his Rotorua, will say today that the burn-out factor of Rotorua is considerable.

These days, there is a new breed emerging. There are no more Tuanuis or Mills to come. But there are new Patchells, Kellys and Mears in the business. Maybe they have different philosophies and different ways of doing things than their fathers. However, the trailers builders of Rotorua have given us some interesting times as well as interesting trailers in the past. And one gets the feeling that there are still more to come.

A LOGO BULL.

The raging bull of Roadmaster is one of the most resilient and recognisable of all trailer builders' logos. It is also one of the most common on mudflaps all over the country.

But what most of us don't know is that it was once green and belonged to another company—an agricultural machinery company called Peerless Agricultural Equipment Limited, jointly owned by Pat Mear and Neil Peterken.

The bull logo, designed by one of Neil's sons, Nigel Peterken, didn't get a lot of exposure in that guise, but it does now under the Roadmaster livery. Incidentally, the name Roadmaster was the creation of Pat's wife, Evelyn (Mama Mia).

