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Bill J Friedrich's Austin

When you mention the township of Maungatapere, most people would struggle to tell you exactly where the small hamlet is located. On State Highway 14, 12 kilometres to the west of Whangarei, is a township small enough that if you blinked you might just miss it. Come to think of it, I don't even remember seeing a pub – now that's small.

Perhaps the defining feature of the township is the remnants of a decent sized dairy factory (the largest and last of several dairy factories) which once took pride of place in the main street and is a constant reminder of times past. Populating this deteriorating building is a wonderful collection of vintage machinery. These machines may be hidden from view, but they are being sheltered for the future.

VINTAGE MACHINERY

This is not the only collection of vintage machinery around this wonderful Northland village, the other collection is located on the edge of town and even includes a very much alive and working example of the 1975 LAD cabbed Leyland.

Tucked away in the Maungatapere Transport Ltd yard, the Leyland truck is the final reminder of years of faithful service from Leyland trucks, from their heydays in the 1960s and 1970s right up until today. Leyland trucks have faithfully carried Maungatapere Transport Ltd through the last four decades of transport in the Northland district but, sadly, today they have been superseded by new trucks – a trio of Scammells, a Foden 3275, an ERF and three new Hinos (currently the favoured replacements).

A peat bog captured this Leyland. Its 'teeth' were knocked out by a chain during a recovery attempt

It is as though time had stood still, but changes to the brake rule and stiffening COF conditions have effectively forced the hand of this small transport operator, quickly propelling them into the 21st Century, with more modern gear replacing classics as the everyday workhorses. But though they have been taken off the road it doesn't mean that they have been forgotten.

MAUNGATAPERE TRANSPORT LTD

Maungatapere Transport Ltd has a proud history, stretching back to 1966 when Bill Morgan took over the transport business of his father-in-law Bill J Friedrich. Bill Morgan will be eighty this year, (he is still driving trucks) and has really only ever known the transport lifestyle. Looking at his slight stature you may wonder how he has been able to handle the rigours of transport, but do so he has and very successfully too.

During the last 43 years Bill has proved an adept and flexible businessman, constantly evolving to meet changing business conditions. He and his wife Alice raised eight children, and Bill is obviously proud of the fact that all of them have been involved with the transport business at some time or another.

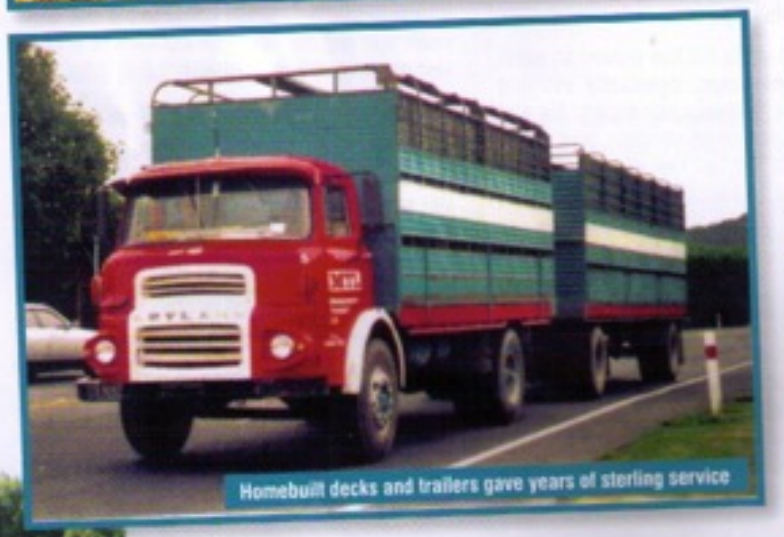
GROWING BUSINESS

Over the years, the business has grown and now includes the transport operation, a farmers' general store, a postal agency, and a workshop (used by themselves and outside clients). The current shop and workshop are located in one of the former general grocers stores (opposite the dairy factory), although you would hardly recognise it now, with a large workshop section added to the rear some years ago and the front end cut back to improve visibility around a road intersection.

OLD FASHIONED CHARACTERS

Bill is one of those venerable old fashioned characters, the ones who have had to be completely self sufficient. They were the type who could turn their hands to almost anything, and usually did. They would tackle any task, whether they knew anything about what they were doing or not – it didn't really matter, the main objective was to get the job done.

Over the years Bill has built a truck (and repowered or rebuilt most of the older fleet), built many of the company's older trailers, built and maintained ▸



Homebuilt decks and trailers gave years of sterling service

the company's quarrying equipment, built or modified the company's buildings... the list goes on. Just about anything that involved working with his hands, Bill has had to master at some stage.

A PRODUCT OF THE GENERATION

Bill is a product of the generation that is very private, not that keen to discuss much, but in truth they are untapped fonts of knowledge. The combination of getting on with any job without fuss and keeping one's head down has seen this small company grow and prosper, riding the changing economic cycles and constantly adapting to the changing business environment.

At the request of Bill's son-in-law, Neil Shayler, we headed north to the largely ignored Northland district, to find out more about Maungatapere Transport Ltd, in the process recording the company history for future generations.

TRANSPORT IN THE BLOOD

Transport must have been in his blood, as Bill's story beings considerably further back, when he was just a boy. The family lived further north in the Northland district, in Kaikohe. Prior to World War II Bill's father, Arthur, purchased the transport business of Bill Morgan (a different Bill Morgan) who was keen to leave the country due to the imminent outbreak of war (he disappearred over the ditch to Australia).

The transport business included a Ford V8 truck and came with a local cream run. During this time the company purchased the first forward control Commer in New Zealand. The family later sold the trucking business to Lloyd and Walker and purchased a 1939 Ford car and continued to run a local taxi service until 1941.

TAKING OVER

By 1955 Bill and Alice had married, and Alice's father, Bill J Friedrich, a farmer in around the Maungatapere district, was in the process of starting his own transport operation. Bill took up a position as a driver on the 1st of July working alongside his brother-in-law Jimmy. Bill Friedrich purchased his first licence from Jack Linnell, and then a second licence from Pat Smith, allowing him to operate two trucks.

Initially the company held a contract to collect cream cans, returning empties at the same time, and deliver them to the Maungatapere Dairy Co. Obviously the company gave excellent service because for the next 11 years, until the cream cans were replaced by road tankers, they held the collection contract.

Business must have been good for this small operation because within two years the company had expanded to include three trucks (five and six ton Austins).

WON FURTHER CONTRACTS

Not only did they collect and return the milk cans, but over time they tendered for and won further contracts and eventually picked up the contracts to deliver the milk powder to the rail, butter to the Port of Whanagrei, the coal required to run the factory from Whareora, and farm supplies from the factory shop to farmers all over the district.

They had cornered the majority of cartage into and out of the factory, and this work only ceased with an amalgamation of many of the local dairy companies into the larger Northland Co-op.

PARTICULARLY BUSY

As you would expect, all this work kept the drivers particularly busy. Bill recalls working huge hours with very little sleep, he remembers that there had to be at least two loads of coal delivered to the factory before 7.30am, and more could be needed through the day – this contract went on for seven years. More than likely they would start out at midnight, collecting coal from Whareora for the first delivery with Bill usually heading out again for the second around 4am dropping it at the factory by 7.30am.

They would then head out and pick up the first load of full cream cans, reload with butter, powder or farm supplies and deliver these. Then they would pick up another load of cans, take more products away, and so the cycle would continue day in day out.

NO MECHANICAL HANDLING DEVICES

As was the norm back then, there were no mechanical handling devices (which we take for granted today) and everything would be hand balled and barrowed onto and off the trucks, meaning the work was often hard, tedious and laborious.

The trucks were small, Morris Commercials originally, with around a three ton capacity. These were followed by larger Austin five tonners, the semi forward control model. The first Austin would be Bill's truck as he had shown he was not afraid of hard work.

The dairy work wasn't the only work undertaken by the company, bobby calves and stock were also carried. Those were the days when the transport regulations were extremely tight (the 30 mile rail restriction was still highly enforced) and deliveries ▸

This Albion has long since past into history

to such far flung locations as the freezing works at Morewa required the issuing of a special licence.

SERVICING THE BOATS

Additionally, there were boats to service. Not only would they have to deliver butter to the Whanagrei wharves, but a weekly service from Auckland would arrive and the freight taken off would require delivery and the boat needed reloaded with butter. And, if that wasn't enough, there was a monthly service from the South Island to attend to as well. All in all, things were definitely very busy.

One of the more interesting points Bill made was about the ongoing need for maintenance to the old petrol powered trucks. Spark plugs and points required regular attention (most weekends), valves did not last that long either and would require a regrind on a fairly regularly basis.

Bills says the situation became considerably worse when the importation of overseas components was halted and only local New Zealand made equivalent components were available. He considers that the NZ made parts were basically rubbish, and wouldn't last anywhere near as well as the Bosch components he had been used to using.

PROVED TO BE LESS RELIABLE

Other components proved to be less reliable than those we take for granted today. What we would consider hugely important safety features were not necessarily as strong and robust as we have come to expect. Bill recalls a couple of examples which could have resulted in disaster but fortunately didn't. The first was when a steering arm dropper snapped on the Austin one day. The second involved a Commer (not one belonging to MTL) that came to a halt, one front wheel missing.

Stockcrates also required regular maintenance, the first Kiwi Engineering crates would need repairs every Friday. Rather than pay someone else to repair the crates, Bill taught himself to weld and over the years has become very adept at the art. From then on he would build almost all of the truck decks, stockcrates, trailers and ancillary gear, and continues to do so today.

WINTER TIME OFF

Winter was the only time the drivers would get any time off, during the season seven days a week was the norm. Winter also proved an ideal time to conduct maintenance and was often used to build new plant or equipment.

On 1st of August 1966 Bill purchased the business from his father-in-law and renamed it Maungatapere Transport Ltd. Nothing really changed except for the name, work continued unabated and quietly the fleet began to grow in size (physically and numerically). The work remained the predominantly rural carriers' standard fare, with race metal, pigs, cattle, bobby calves and bagged manure high on the list of items requiring delivery.

ALICE HEAVILY INVOLVED

Alice was also heavily involved with the smooth running of the operation, especially in the early days. Like most transport 'widows', Alice would be answering the phone, dispatching the trucks and handling the accounts, all from the kitchen table, whilst raising their brood of eight children. Wives of transport operators are often the unsung heroes of the industry, they are usually never seen but are often the lynch pin that holds together so many businesses.

Bill took over the three Austins from the old business and quickly proceeded to purchase an additional two. But change was just around the corner with the purchase of the company's first Leyland truck in 1969. Leyland trucks were hugely expensive compared to other British marques (you ▸

could have brought two and a half Austins for the same money, remembers Bill), but they were considered top of the range, quality vehicles.

PICK UP NO.5

Bill travelled to Nelson (where the Leylands were assembled) to pick up No.5 and drove her home (she can be found resting in a shed on the farm awaiting the tender loving care necessary to return her to road going condition). This old truck, like all the other Leylands that would follow, gave sterling service and most of Bill's Leylands were only phased out during the last couple of years.

Purchased through local Leyland agent Athol le Valiant, No. 5 was quite a departure for the company as she was the first diesel powered lorry in the fleet. The hoist was purchased from Walker Bros. and Bill proceeded to build the deck for the truck in the shed. This was the only truck that Bill purchased and paid off with a "Hire Purchase" agreement – all the rest have been paid for in cash.

FIRST TRAILER

In another first, No.5 was the first in the fleet to tow a trailer. Bill, in his usual fashion, purchased some Tanner axles and Leyland springs and set about building a two axle trailer. A quick look around the back of one of the sheds finds that original trailer (minus its wheels) surrounded by long grass, but it still appears relatively sound after all those years working.

The following Leylands would all be second hand. Two of the Austins were traded in as part payment on the second Leyland – No. 6 was a six by two tipper, with a lifting trailing axle. We were told that this ▸

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truck could be a bit of a handful with the rear axle up. It was purchased with a broken chassis and a second hand pair of rails were ordered and duly arrived from England.

FATE INTERVIENS

As fate would have it, the new chassis rails were far too long for No. 6. However the extra chassis would conveniently form the basis for a brand new Leyland No. 7 (the last ever to be built in New Zealand), that was assembled in Maungatapere Transport Ltd's shed in 1975. Fortunately the rails had a proper chassis number stamped them which facilitated the registration of the truck.

Over the years Bill had accumulated a huge stock of Leyland parts (also purchasing Athol le Valiant's stock when he ceased selling Leylands), and had sufficient parts (both new and second hand) to build a complete truck. Even today there are still sufficient stored parts to get most of the old Leyland fleet back on the road again – and then some.

The only discernable difference between the new Leyland and a proper factory built model was the inclusion of Hendrickson walking beam rear suspension. Originally she was powered by a Leyland fixed head 500 motor but has since been repowered with a Detroit Fuel Pincer V8 (and the straight pipes give it a lovely engine note). No. 7 is the only Leyland to remain road legal and is still in regular use, but is not favoured by drivers because of the interior noise.

LEYLANDS BOUGHT RELIABILITY

The Leylands bought reliability to the fleet, something that had been missing from the old ▸

Even the Winterless North suffers from the occasional frost

petrol powered British makes. The company bought a number of second hand Leylands over the years, culminating in a trio of Ergomatic cabbed models. Two Ergomatics remain (one having been sold to a collector) and four LAD cabbed trucks are stored in various sheds around the property.

It is only during the last couple of years that the fleet has undergone any significant change. In keeping with the Leyland produced theme, the first replacements for the Leylands were Cummins powered S26 Scammells. The Scammells have proved very successful but even these are being used less frequently. Newer trucks such as the ERF and a trio of new Hinos are definitely taking over the heavier duty tasks today.

COMPANY QUARRY

For 30 years the company owned and operated a quarry, just 10 kilometres up the road, at Kara. The quarry proved to be an invaluable asset during this period, it provided considerable work for the company, especially during the winter season. Bill only let it go recently, the amount of overburden requiring removal before they could extract further rock supplies had made the operation uneconomic.

Being a canny character, Bill sold the land and purchased a further 40 acres that abut two of the boundaries around the company's current yard. The land is being used as grazing pasture for stock but will eventually become housing plots for family members.

THREE HAY GANGS

For many years hay was a major undertaking for Maungatapere Transport Ltd. At their peak they ran three gangs carting hay, with three trucks flat stick on this work during the height of the season. They were not backward with their equipment, and had a number of hay elevators to lift the bales up to a manageable height for stacking, of course these were made in the company's workshop.

They were also quick to recognise the importance that silage would have in the dairy industry and were one of the first carriers in the district to deliver a one stop silage cutting, delivery and stacking service to their farmer clients. Where other contractors would hire in various trucking companies to work alongside them at harvest time, Maungatapere Transport Ltd could offer the complete package.

Loading at some ramps can be a challenge

OTHERS NOTICE BENEFITS

For many years, Bill's operation was the only one to offer this service, but of more recent times, other carriers have noticed the benefits of offering a similar service, in the process cutting rates to gain market share. Bill has maintained the agri business side of the operation and currently operates a Deutz tractor, tow behind silage chopper, spreader bin, bale wrapper and a selection of implements and a number of spare tractors.

Stock cartage continues to be a major component of the business, having been up and down over the years as farmer needs changed with their economic fortunes. With the farmers doing quite nicely at present they are seeing an increase in stock numbers for delivery to works around Northland, Waikato and Auckland, in addition to the farm shifts and stock sales work.

Considering the rainfall in Northland, you might consider it unusual that there would be a water delivery business, but that too is just another component to their diverse operation. There have been periods when the north has been quite dry and about four years they were covering up to 2,000 kilometres a week on local water deliveries.

PROUD OF FAMILY

Bill is obviously proud of the fact that he not only has eight children, but also that his business has been able to provide employment for them all at different stages. Currently David, Rex, Phillip, Grant, Carol and Ruth work in different capacities within the company. Over recent years, Bill and Alice have shifted the ownership of the business to the family, and now they take a much more back seat role.

David is on his second stint with the company and drives the brand new Hino 700, Rex is responsible for the running of the workshop. Phillip looks after the farm contracting side and drives the lowloader truck when required. If the workshop is busy he can be found assisting Rex.

Grant is now considered as the general manger, responsible for the overall performance of the family operation. Not only does he look after the general store and postal agency, monitor and control the financials, but he also undertakes the dispatching and drives any of the trucks during peak periods if required.

Carol handles all the stock sales and does most of the small stock pick-ups, but is just as happy hopping behind the wheel of a truck and trailer unit and heading off to the works when needed. Ruth helps with the running of the office on a part time basis. Sue does odd jobs for the company, often collecting small items and parcels from Whangarei and bringing them out to the depot. She is just got her Heavy Transport licence (with coaching from Carol). Pam has moved to Christchurch and no longer has an active involvement.

Roland, one of the sons-in-law used to be involved in the workshop side but has recently moved on. Leone (Phillip's wife) assists with farm supply and ▸

Cameron Shayler receiving instructions from his Dad, Neil

The family, Cameron Shayler, Bill Morgan, David Morgan, Carol, Neil and Emma Shayler.

Ongoing modernisation sees Hino as the preferred marque

hardware store, the postal agency and helps out with some of the accounting chores.

On top of this Neil Shayler (married to Carol) is also employed as a driver come handyman, with a bit of the mechanical side handled if necessary. Neil and Carol's son Cameron is the first of the third generation to have an involvement in the transport operation, but whilst he is still at school his experiences are limited to weekends and holidays.

PART TIME DRIVERS

Three part time drivers (all retired farmers) from around the district can be found assisting the company when needed, usually through the busy harvest season. Bill Hyde drives one of the tip trucks, Ewen White handles both tipper and stock rigs whilst Jim Irving helps the farm contracting division, driving the tractor on raking, mowing and bale wrapping duties.

Service is the foundation on which this company has built a very tidy rural carriers operation. Being on time, having well trained staff who are competent in the work, be it stock handling or metal spreading, has proved to be extremely important. The family remain convinced that it is service not price that has brought the company this far and will continue to take it into the future.

SEAMLESS SERVICE

By delivering a seamless service, the company has built a sizable and loyal clientele, and has done so without the great fuss and pizzazz that some operators seem to thrive on. The fact that they still consider a 1975 Leyland a viable vehicle, which many may find astounding, may indeed point to the potential for using vehicles for much longer than many would consider practical.

Perhaps there are some valuable lessons here that we could all learn from. Bill is a striking example of what can be achieved by taking the bull by the horns and trying out new skills, unfortunately he is one of a dying breed and it will certainly be a great loss not only to his family but also to road transport in general when he passes on. Men like Bill built the industry to the level we find it today, it is such a pity they have to move on.

As a strong and cohesive family unit, the business has done well, and is likely to continue in this vein. It is not often we find family operations, with so many siblings working closely together, that have been able to stand the test of time, yet there is harmony and a general understanding that if everyone pulls their weight they can all succeed together.

Silage is important to the local Dairy Industry

Climbing one of the steep inclines around Northland