

A New Ramblings & Rumbings from the Highways of NZ.

By Grumpy Geoffrey O'Connell. 2019.

Part 2 of 2

McLean Motor-car Act 1898'. That was followed over the years by a whole raft of Parliamentary legislation which included:

In 1902 the '*Motor Cars Regulation Act*' under which an import tariff applied to cars and car components. In 1907/8 a 20% tariff was introduced on assembled cars imported but with no duty on bare chassis.

In 1934 tariffs were announced to protect British Empire Trade and encourage the assembly of cars in New Zealand. This led over the years to an ever-expanding number of such 'Car Assembly Plants' which by the 1980's numbered some sixteen.

Their output was completed cars made-up from '*Completely Knocked Down (ckd)*' packs from the then industrialised nations of the world. By the by, in 1938 Import controls were passed to assist preserving foreign currency reserves. Perhaps the most radical of the various Government legislations was that in 1984.

In it all controls on inward and outward foreign transactions were removed and the '*Motor Industry Plan*' was effected which relaxed the rigid control of the import trade in cars.

That had a dramatic effect on the assembly plant business such as that by 1988 only seven of some sixteen businesses were still operating. A further amendment in 1987 resulted in all import controls being removed and a reduction of the tariffs on vehicles and automobile parts.

That finally brought the death-knell to the remaining car assembly plants by 1998. It has been reported that between 1987 & 1992 some 76,000 assembly plant jobs were lost.

However, as the last such plant closed in 1998, I am somewhat at a loss to understand the officially quoted years!

The 'Rise and Fall' of the Car-Assembly Plants.

The first car assembly plant was the '*1922 Colonial Motor Company*' at Wellington, which was devoted to the Ford Motor Company range. They subsequently built 'outpost' assembly plants at Parnell, Auckland, and Timaru, southwest of Christchurch. In 1936 Ford Motor Company of Canada took over the assembly operation which they relocated to a plant at Seaview, Lower Hutt. Ford's closed the operation in 1988.

Next to open its doors was the '*General Motors*' plant in 1926 at Petone in the Hutt Valley. It specialised in the assembly of American Buick, Chevrolet and Pontiac cars. From 1931 British Vauxhalls as well as Bedford trucks were also produced. In 1954, Australian Holden cars were introduced to the assembly range and in 1967 a new assembly plant was opened at Trentham, Upper Hutt. The Petone plant closed in 1984 and the Trentham plant in 1990. Some 600,000 vehicles had been assembled.

In 1931 the '*Rover Company of NZ*' announced in February 1932 it was opening a car assembly plant at Petone. By July 1933 the premises were empty and up for sale. Possibly in 1934, but definitely by 1935, the '*Todd Motor Company*', an Otago based Ford Dealer, built an assembly plant at Petone.

This was for the assembly of initially Chrysler and Dodge cars which were supplemented

by the Rootes Group (Gt Britain) Hillman, Humber and Sunbeam models. In 1970 they acquired the right to assemble Mitsubishi cars and in 1975 they moved the factory to a larger plant in Porirua, in the Wellington Region. October 1973 saw the 200,000th vehicle produced – a Hillman Hunter station wagon. In 1987 Todd Motors divested themselves of the business, selling it to NZ Mitsubishi Motors, who closed the enterprise down in 1998.

In 1936 a consortium of Amuri Motors, PH Vickery, Cossens and Black & Boon formed '*Motor Assemblies (South Island) Ltd.*' to assemble cars at a Christchurch premises.

The chosen vehicles to be assembled were those of the American Dodge company. Post WW2 a new assembly plant in Christchurch became operational. It was taken over by Standard-Triumph-International in 1954 but the plant ceased production in 1965. In 1937 the partnership of Jack Seabrook (with later his younger Brother Philip) and Bill Fowlds formed '*Seabrook Fowlds*' to assemble Austin cars at Newmarket, Auckland.

After WW2 the company linked up with other Austin distributors to assemble Austin trucks which enterprise was merged with New Zealand Motor Corporation in 1970. The latter's plant at Petone finally closed in 1983. In 1939 the '*Austin South Island*' was formed by a consortium of car dealers to be based in Christchurch.

In 1938 '*Dominion Motors*' commenced construction of a car assembly plant at Newmarket, which was completed by 1939. Despite WW2 it thrived and built a new plant at Panmure, Auckland which was completed in 1954. There Morris cars and commercials were assembled. In 1978 the Newmarket operation was closed and all the work transferred to the Panmure plant. That factory finally shut-up shop in 1987. Post

WW2 the '*Associated Motor Industries & Austin Distributors Federation*' combined to open a car assembly plant at Petone in 1946 which closed in 1983.

In 1958 '*Motor Holdings aka VW Motors*' built a car assembly plant in Otahuhu, Auckland. Into the 1970's the factory assembled Volkswagens.

They were followed by Datsun, Fiat Bambina, Hudson, Nash, Peugeot 403 & 404, Simca, Skoda and Studebaker cars as well as the 'all New Zealand made' '*Treka*' (1966-1973). The Treka was a Land Rover '*lookalike*' but possessed very little of the off-road proficiency of the latter. The components for it were sourced from the Skoda Octavia and imported in '*ckd*' form from Czechoslovakia. Some 2,500 were built in its years of manufacture. During the assembly plant's 'life-time' about 127,000 vehicles were assembled.

In 1964 '*Steel Brothers*', to become '*Steelbro*', and trading as '*Steel Motor Assemblies*' opened a car assembly plant in Christchurch. They commenced building Prince Gloria's, initially produced by the Prince Motor Company and then after 1971 by Nissan Motors.

That model was followed by Datsun's, Mazda's and Toyota cars. In addition, they made and exported Lotus Seven sports cars from 1973 to 1979. In that latter year the plant was acquired by Toyota and was finally closed in 1996.

The '*Campbell Motor Industries*' car assembly plant at Thames was completed in 1964. Manufacturer's '*ckd*' packs assembled included those from Nissan, Peugeot, Renault and Toyota as well as the Chevrolet Impala, Jeep, Rambler Classic and Rebel cars.

In 1975 Consolidated Motor Industries - to be Challenge Corporation - to be Toyota New Zealand - took over CMI.

Road Death Toll and the Country's Roads.

Naturally accompanying these massive increases in population and car ownership so the annual road death toll has risen – alarmingly.

In 1925 that numbered 103, by 1930 it was 246, in 1939 the total was 246, in 1953 it had risen to 313, in 1971 the figure was 677, in 2015 the amount was 319, in 2017 the death toll was 378 and for the year 2018 the tragedy reached 380, give or take one or three fatal accidents.

Meanwhile, the total length of all the country's roads in 1929 was some 100,000 kilometres whilst in 2016, despite all the improvements that had taken place over the years, including new motorways and toll roads, allegedly the total length was some 94,000 kilometres. Mmmh! We have lost some kilometres 'gumnor'.

The Changes to the Road Freight Transport Restrictions – and the consequences.

The origins of the New Zealand Railway system date back to the 1860's. By 1880 the overall tracks were of some 1,900 kilometres in length, transporting circa 3 million passengers and 830,000 tonnes of freight. In 1953 the Railway system had grown to 5,689 kilometres.

To protect the Railways from road competition, in 1936 Transport Licencing laws were passed precluding road transport from carrying goods in excess of 48 kilometres from their point of loading. In 1961 this was increased to 64 kilometres and in 1977 to 150 kilometres. In 1983 this road transport distance restriction was done away with altogether.

It is sufficient to record that in 1972 road haulage had about 50% of the land freight transport but by the year of the total deregulation that had risen to some 80% of the carriage trade.

In the year 2014 trucks had some 91% of the trade, Railways some 7% and coastal shipping the remaining 2% of the freight. There is no need to advise that the increase in the number of lorries and trucks using the highways has been dramatic and of course has escalated dramatically the road congestion in many areas of the country.

In 1982 the Railways were reorganised to become a Government owned Corporation – nationalisation in any other language. As stated in the previous paragraph, in 1983 the legal protection for the Railways in respect of road competition for freight was removed. In 1990 the operating possessions of the Railway Corporation were transferred to a Limited Liability Company, namely New Zealand Rail Ltd., but still owned by the Government.

Subsequently this was sold to a private consortium in 1993. During all these various 'shenanigans' the number of employees dropped from 21,000 in 1982 to 3,757 by the year 2002.

Before concluding this 'Railway saga', and the article, it is appropriate to add that Rose and I first visited New Zealand in January 2000. That was the year in which the 'America's Cup' yacht race was staged at Auckland in February/March. I seem to recall that of the two or three gentlemen who had allegedly profited during all the 'Railway goings-on', one chose the yachting event to return to New Zealand from a 'Swiss sabbatical'.

Here endeth this lesson.

Grumpy Geoffrey