

# *A New Ramblings & Rumbings from the Highways of NZ.*

*By Grumpy Geoffrey O'Connell. 2019.*

*Part 1 of 2*

This is it, the unvarnished truth. The appalling toll of life on New Zealand highways and byways is not due to the state, or more realistically the shortcomings in the state of the roads. It is because of the abysmal lack of driving skills of the nations drivers. To substantiate this as a reality it is only necessary to quote from a Government Associate Transport Minister who recently likened Kiwi drivers to '*near misses, bad habits and uneducated drivers*'. Another opinion by none other than the New Zealand news service, Newshub, considered '*If (New Zealanders) want to cut the road toll, stop driving like idiots*' and continued that New Zealanders driving record is one of the worst in the developed world.

Thus the popular myths that the carnage on the nation's roads is the result of overseas drivers and or the poor state of the roadways are absolute nonsense. As to the latter of the two insinuations I have the credit of driving in many Scandinavian and European countries as well as the Middle Eastern nation of Turkey over a number of years in the 1990's and early 2000's. In respect of the condition of their roads the particular countries that stand-out in my mind for some of the most appalling highways were those of Yugoslavia, the Greek islands and Turkey. In those years many of their thoroughfares made New Zealand roadways appear almost palatial.

Perhaps the most challenging of all those roadways then was the 'old' coastal road that ran west along the Black Sea from Trabzon in the far north-east of Turkey, through the coal mining city of Zonguldak to Karasu.

There the road turns southwards to Adapazari thence westwards towards the capital Istanbul beside the Bosphorus Straight. The journey from Trabzon to Karasu is some 1000km or 13 hours or more driving - depending on the oncoming traffic. In those years much of the tortuous cliff edge road, often high-up above the sea, was unsealed and only one vehicle wide. As most of the traffic was trucks, the drivers of which did not lift their foot off the accelerator pedal, it was necessary to look out for the approaching clouds of road dust. Once sighted it was essential to locate a layby carved into the cliff face in which to park-up until the lorry had hurtled past. Woe betide you and your vehicle if a pull-off could not be found!

Mark you driving in Yugoslavia was almost always very dramatic. That was prior to the break-up of the '*Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia*' into initially five separate Republics in 1992 following the '*Yugoslav Wars*'. Incidentally post 2006 that number became six Republics and in 2008 a seventh may or may not have been created. But back to the pre-1992 road driving conditions. After the death of President (Josip Broz) Tito in 1980 the Republic of Yugoslavia became increasingly unstable. This was most notable to visitors in economic and power service terms. It became increasingly noticeable that Towns and Cities would be without electric power at night-time and that fuel stations would often be without fuel or electricity or both. The few much heralded motorways were usually some 800 metres or so long after which they degenerated into piles of aggregate and other road building materials.

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In fact in those days 'of yore' the main roadway through Yugoslavia was simply a two lane affair with the mostly lorry traffic hurtling along at or about the upper speed limit. If you were unable to drive at that speed it was best to pull off the road or you would be smashed-off it. And I will not attempt to describe the lavatorial standards of the alleged service stations on that so-called highway. Sufficient to advise that if the need arose Rose and I would wander off into the surrounding forests.

An unforgettable moment occurred when we were piloting our motor van down a very steep descent of which the left-hand side of the thoroughfare was sheer rock face and the right-hand side bordered a precipitous ravine. As we hurtled down the road I became acutely aware that ahead of us there had been a rock-slip and that the road surface had simply disappeared. Yes, disappeared. Not to be thwarted the enterprising locals had rigged-up a few lengthways timber baulks from one side to the other of the chasm to act as a repair. As I approached the improvised wooden lash-up I prayed that the track of my van's tyres were of the correct width to match the timber layout. They were! 'There's lucky'!

Before enumerating my views in respect of the appalling NZ driving habits it might be relevant to repeat the wisdom of a gentleman who works occasionally on our NZ property. He is of the opinion that his wife is a gentle, thoughtful, kind person – that is until she gets behind the wheel of a motor car. Once there she effectively 'sprouts horns and a tail' and her manner alters dramatically to one of aggression and, in effect, 'get out of my way'. She terrifies him. Enough written.

Now to enumerate the very persistent, obvious and dangerous faults to other

motorists evinced by almost all New Zealand drivers of motor cars. I have placed them in the order I consider the most hazardous, in descending degree of censure. Obviously this sequence of shame, lack of motoring manners and driving sins could be shuffled about.

**Consumption of drink, drugs and or both.**

Really no more be added.

**Failure to belt-up the seat belts.** Here again nothing additional need be written.

**Overloaded numbers of passengers.** As above.

Now to the real gripes:

**Tailgating.** The infuriating practice of a following driver practically placing his bonnet in your boot. Officially it describes the act of a driver positioning his vehicle very close behind you, not leaving enough distance to stop without causing a collision if the car in front has to brake suddenly. It is very thought-provoking to consider vehicle stopping distances. A car braking length travelling at 100km/h after the time taken to 'register' the need to make an emergency stop is some 56m. That of a 48 tonne truck and trailer is some 185m. Thus if as a motor car driver you are being tailgated by such a vehicle and you have to make an emergency stop you and the car will inevitably be reduced to the size of a matchbox and you will not have a care in the world – or the next for that matter.

**Undertaking.** The act of vehicle initially behind you overtaking on the kerb, inside of your vehicle - that is using the inside lane. Where this becomes very dangerous is when two lanes of a highway merge into one which quite often occurs after a roundabout and usually it is the inside lane which runs-out.

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**Weaving.** The driver who is intent on overtaking all and sundry on a two lane highway by criss-crossing the traffic lanes in order to pass other drivers.

**Failing to slow down when a driver in front of one commits a 'whoopsie' and driving as fast as is possible at a driver who may have chosen to turn across the oncoming traffic.**

**Failure to stop at a T junction, with the miscreant failing to look either way.**

**Lack of any signal (with indicators) as to what direction a driver intends to take, more especially at roundabouts.**

**Not allowing vehicles queuing-up on a side road to slip into the mainstream of highway traffic by slowing down and permitting them into the flow. I call it enflading however.....!**

**Driving at the top end of the speed limit along country lanes**

**Failing to slow down and 'give room' to cyclists, horse riders and pedestrians.**

**Not using headlights to indicate to a driver that they may pull-out or turn across the oncoming traffic flow.**

**Drivers who amble along in the outside, overtaking traffic lane of a two lane highway.**

I am sure there may be more driving faults to detail but .....

There are of course some factors for the almost total lack of driving etiquette which were not helped over the years by the following:

Large increases in both population and motor car ownership. Additionally, once the unimpeded arrival of mainly Japanese imported cars with substantially increased engine capacities was allowed, a significant increase in the higher speed of vehicles.

A very small increase, if any, in the overall length of the country's roadways over the last century.

The change in the freight train rules which resulted in a large increase in trucks and commercial vehicles on the roadways.

The change in the car importation regulations which dramatically increased the number of vehicles on the roads and incidentally led to the closure of all the country's car assembly plants.

In quoting this or that figure in the following part of this commentary I would remind those that have bothered to persevere thus far of my 'carry-on' that a certain Mark Twain was amongst those that popularised the phrase that '*there are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies and statistics*'. How true, more especially of some politicians!

### **Population of NZ.**

In 1920 it has been reported that the populace figure was round about 1.24 million people; in 1930 circa 1.48 million; in 1940 about 1.6 million; in 1950 approximately 1.89 million; in 1960 some 2.36 million; in 1970 give or take 2.8 million; in 1980 it was 3.160'ish million; in 1990 the figure had marginally increased to 3.37 million; in the year 2000 that had risen to 3.85 million; in 2010 it was 4.35 million; and in 2019 we are informed it is 4.79 million. In that 99 years the population has increased almost fourfold.

### **Motor Car Ownership.**

A William McLean (1845-1914), then of Wellington, imported in 1898 the very first motor cars to arrive in New Zealand, namely two Benz cars. The smaller of the two was the '*Petrolette*' model and the larger a '*Lightening*'. He had purchased them from a Paris (France) Showroom in 1897 whilst on a European tour in 1887.

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They arrived on-board the 'SS *Rotomahana*' at Wellington Port on the 19<sup>th</sup> February 1898. Whether they were new or second-hand and if manufactured in France or Germany is not known. However it was reported they cost £130 and £160 respectively. To those purchase prices had to added the cost of shipping to NZ and the import duty charged of £75. They were powered by single cylinder, 3hp engines and the originally fitted tiller steering was replaced by vertically mounted 'tram-like' wheel.

The top speeds were variously quoted as 12mph or 18mph. Take your pick! Unfortunately there wasn't any legal provision for them to be used on the roads so William introduced a private bill to Parliament – '*The McLean Motor-car Act 1898*'. When passed, amongst the stipulations of the Act were that the driver of the vehicle had to be licensed, cars had to have lights after dark, a warning bell (or other instrument) had to be fitted, the maximum allowable speed was 12mph and 8mph in a town and one brake had to be fitted for every two wheels.

On a personal note William had been born in Scotland and emigrated to NZ in 1863'ish to take part in the '*Otago Gold Rush*'. He was successful in that enterprise and after moves '*here and there*' he settled in Reefton where he was a schoolmaster after which he became an auctioneer as well as a mining and commission agent in respect of the goldfield activities. He moved to Wellington in 1884 where he became an MP between 1892 and 1893.

Incidentally in the year 1911 New Zealand had 400,000 working horses. Whatever, in 1925 the citizens of the nation owned some 71,000 private motor cars and by the year 1930 that had risen to circa 155,000 cars. In that latter year NZ boasted one car for every

nine people which was probably the highest car ownership in the world. Another statistic was that NZ had a disturbingly high number of road deaths, with 246 in that year. Prior to 1925 the '*Main Highways Act*' of 1922 abolished all road tolls and in 1927 bulk petroleum spirit was first imported into the country. By 1939 there were some 170,000 cars around which by 1953 had risen to 425,000 and in 1971 had reached 1 million. In the year 2015 there were some 3.85 million vehicles and in 2017 the figure was reported to be 4.15 million, which figure included all cars, trucks, buses, motorcycles and mopeds. One authoritative New Zealand automobile magazine has suggested that NZ might well be the top country in the world in respect of household ownership of motor vehicles.

The early year's supply of petrol (or benzine as it was then known) for motor cars was carried out by being transported in 2 and 4 gallon benzine tins or larger drums. A case in point was a Frank Farrell (1884-1967) who was known as '*the Benzine King*' of Hamilton. An erstwhile employee described him as having sold benzine from his home in tins prior to his acquiring the Collingswood Garage where was mounted the first petrol pump (or bowser as they are known in Australia) in Hamilton. He was responsible for the first petrol tanker delivery to the town probably in the early 1920's. There is an undated photograph of that tanker driving down Collingwood Street being led by a full brass band and another of the tanker unloading the fuel into the Garage's underground tank. In the photographs, to the right of the Garage is the '*Commercial Hotel*' which was built in 1876 and is still in existence although the Garage is long gone. The oil companies established the distribution of fuel in the early to mid-1920's.

*Geoffrey (Part 2 in September mag)*