

people

Family clocks up mileage

AFTER a combined total of more than 2½ million miles behind the steering wheel, Allan Gray and his son Doug have carried on what seems to be a grand family tradition.

Allan Gray's father, Frank Baldock Gray drove one of the first trucks in the Wairarapa and later became Transport Wairarapa's first chairman and general manager.

Frank Gray's first truck was a Bessemer imported from Europe around 1913. By the time Transport Wairarapa was formed in October 1940, he owned six trucks and two service cars. Eighteen local carriers made up the company and each had shares equivalent to the value of their assets. Frank Gray was the biggest shareholder.

As well, he had 10 children, three daughters and seven sons, and five of his sons, including Allan, followed their father's wheel marks and became truck drivers.

A year after Transport Wairarapa was founded, Frank Gray's grandson Doug left school aged 16 and joined the company.

"I was always out with Dad," he says, "learning to drive a truck, as soon as I was tall enough to see through the windscreen and under the steering wheel."

After being employed for a few weeks painting trucks, Doug's career as a truck driver started with the onset of the busy season.

First he drove a 3-4 tonne tip-truck carting spoil for bridge approach fillings or for road deviations; and there was coal from the railway too. Then, after doing the Rangitumau (north of Masterton) mail run for a year, together with other general cartage, it was into the Air Force for 18 months where he continued to drive trucks.

Back in civvy street and general carrying, Doug married Shirley Brown in 1947 — they have two daughters and three sons; two of the latter are mechanics.

From 1948 to 1961 — when the ages of their

children demanded they move back to Masterton to be near a secondary school — Shirley and Doug lived at Homewood near the coast and about 60 kms south east of Masterton. Here Doug did the daily mail-run to Masterton and back.

In 1951 he was put in charge of Transport Wairarapa's most expensive vehicle. It was a Canadian Ford petrol-driven bus, costing 5028 pounds by the time it was ready to go on the road.

Since 1961, Doug has driven stock trucks almost exclusively and he drove the Wairarapa's first three-decker sheep truck in 1967. Costing more than £30,000 and carrying around 650 lambs each truck and trailer load, this AEC truck moved more than 77,000 sheep and cattle in its first five months of operation.

A far cry from the 120 lambs he used to carry on a double decker in the 1940's and the 80 lambs carried by his father in 1923 from Riversdale to Waingawa on what was probably the first double decked truck in the world. The 1920 Commer, capable of a maximum speed of 15 mph with its three gears and chain drive, its sheep crate folded flat against the cab, leaving most of the deck to be used for carting posts etc — thus allowing back loading whenever possible.

In those early days, vehicles ran on solid rubber tyres without tread, there were no rear mirrors, no windscreen wipers — unless they were hand-operated, no side-windows, unless they were celluloid and easily cracked, and only a canvas roof over the cab.

Chains were always carried to help with traction when necessary. It once took Allan three days to get to Pongaroa and back to Masterton — a distance of 180 kms. There was no



Doug Gray (left) and his father Allan.

metal available in that area and the roads were simply clay tracks — in wet weather they became treacherous — "though once you got in a rut," laughs Allan, "at least you couldn't slide off the track."

In the summer months it wasn't unusual to sleep out on the side of the road — "we'd leave the night before and kip down wherever we felt like it."

In 1927, the first pneumatic tyred truck was purchased. It was, in those days, the tops in trucks — a Leyland with overhead valve motor and worth 1100 pounds. A Bedford of similar size cost around 450 pounds. The Leyland gave the most comfortable ride yet and was faster and safer — its tyres giving some grip on the road. But the brakes were still only on the rear wheels and would not hold on hills!

To-day, by contrast, trucks are diesel driven; they are, by comparison, immense in size — and getting bigger, and faster. They have heated cabs, radios, radio-telephones, power steering, air brakes, synchromesh gear boxes, a complicated system of vision mirrors and sleeper cabs — all for a cost of more than \$200,000! "I find the speed and size quite alarming," says Doug. "I wonder where it will all end.

And we don't see many really big rigs in the Wairarapa — yet."

But what part do the drivers' wives play in all this? It hasn't really changed too much. "We're always waiting meals," says Shirley, resigned to the inevitable.

"Yes, that's not changed," adds Doug's mother, "and in the early days, there was no way of letting us know when they'd be home." To-day a message on the radio-telephone is relayed to the waiting wife immediately.

"Saturday is our only really free day," says Doug, "it's the day for a lie-in, to do the garden, cut the lawns, spend a bit of time with the family."

There's a real bond of friendship between drivers. Though they may not meet very often to talk, even with those in their own companies at the peak of the season — there's always that friendly signal as they meet on the highways.

Recently, the Transport Wairarapa Social Club put on a social for ex-staff members. Around 90 drivers, mechanics and office staff came from all over the North Island to meet old friends, look at old photographs, inspect the latest vehicles and to yarn.

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"That's the thing about truck driving — each day's different. You seldom know beforehand where you'll be going, what you'll be carrying or when you'll be back."

"In the old days," says Doug's Dad, "there were very few vehicles on the road and we seldom went out of the district. There was a forty-mile restriction. It was a great event when you were given a job like taking a load of stud rams to the Feilding Fair. We used to wonder weeks ahead who's going to get the job?"

"You always learn to take the other joker on the road for a mug — you develop a sort of sixth sense — you're prepared for what the other fella will do. It's defensive driving." But both Doug and his father still hate having someone sitting on their tail — or shooting out in front of them from a side road. It's not easy to brake a big rig in a hurry — or to build up speed again.

Together, Doug and his father have driven for almost 100 years and in that time, neither has had a major accident.



Wairarapa Transport's first 3-decker sheep truck, a 1967 AEC costing more than £30,000.

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