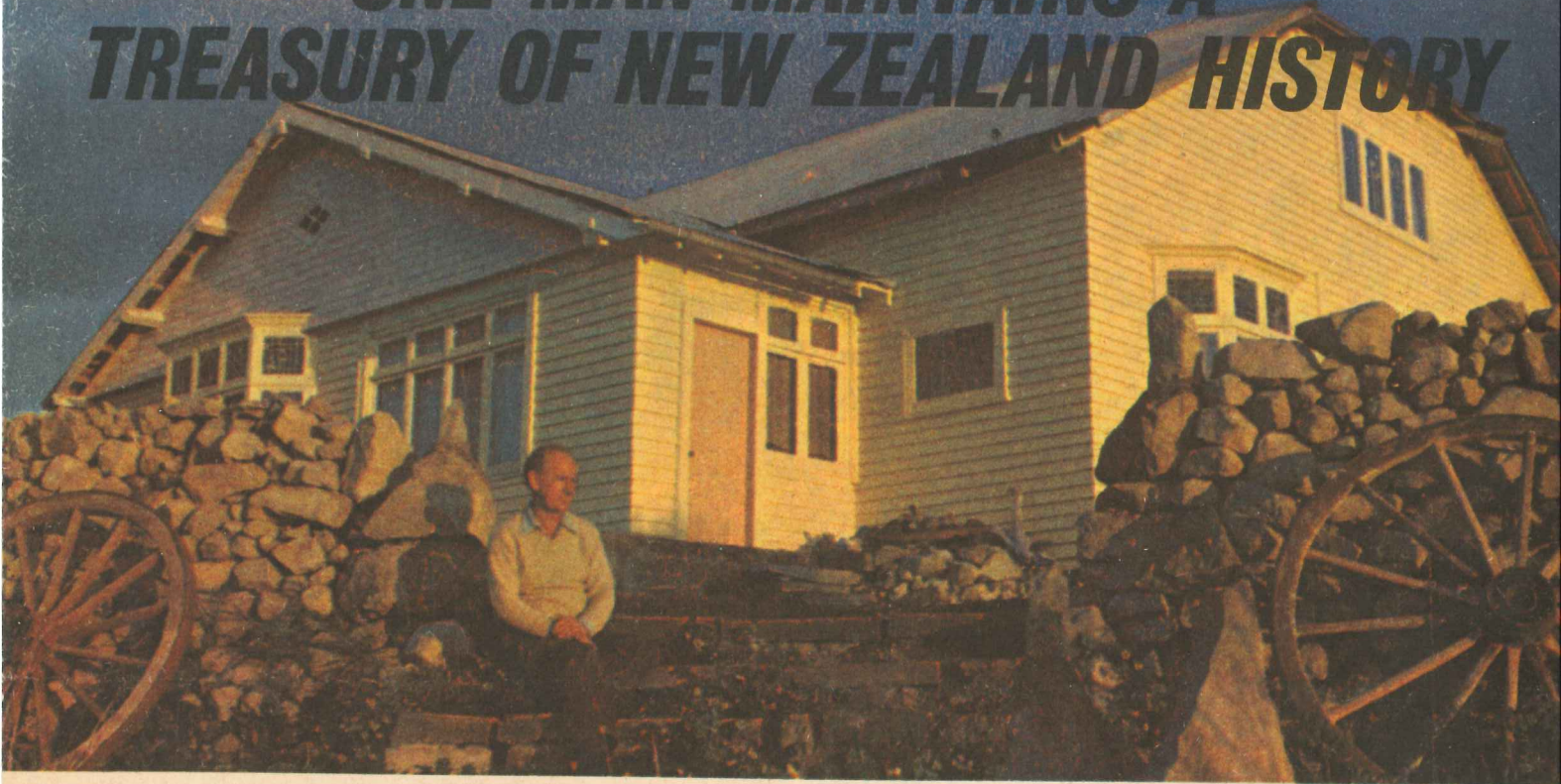


A SMALL, KINDLY MAN — AUTHOR, HISTORIAN, NARRATOR, PATCHWORK QUILT AND RUG MAKER, AND RETIRED ANTIQUE DEALER — HAS PAINSTAKINGLY BUILT UP AN INCREDIBLE COLLECTION, BUT HE NOW NEEDS, AND HOPES FOR, ASSISTANCE TO PRESERVE IT. TIME IS HIS BIGGEST ENEMY.

## ONE MAN MAINTAINS A TREASURY OF NEW ZEALAND HISTORY



Above: Mr Butler, sitting on the steps outside his home, at sunset.

Left: Playing his beloved "square." A plaque of Schubert, Mr Butler's favourite composer, is above him on the wall.

Right: Mr Butler's bedroom seen through the door which came from the first jail built at New Plymouth. The peephole burnt into the wood can be seen near the latch of the door. The kauri bed is over 100 years old. The painting above the bed is an original oil painted about 1820. Mr Butler is unsure of the artist's name.





BY STAFF WRITER  
BEATRICE YOUNG

**SURROUNDED** by empty paddocks in the farming district of Lepperton, near New Plymouth, stands a large barn-like, lemon-painted house, which its owner has made a treasury of Taranaki pioneer history.

The house belongs to Mr F. B. Butler — a small, quick, kindly man who is an author, historian, narrator, patchwork quilt and rug maker and retired antique dealer. He is the author of "Early Days: Taranaki," and founder of the New Plymouth Historical Society. But come and meet him and his incredible collection.

When you drive in across the grass below Mr Butler's house, the first thing you notice are the cats — all colours and ages — among the early daffodils blooming in the grass, behind the farm trap, sitting on the step of the old shed. All look sleek and well fed.

Stone steps, flanked by two cart-wheels standing against stone walls, lead up to the house. No mortar has been used for the walls. The stones, cleared from the paddocks, have been painstakingly fitted together by Mr Butler. Beside the door of the house is a massive anchor from an old ferry which used to run on the Mokau River. At a bay-window to the right a skull gazes out impersonally.

Mr Butler welcomes us at the door and ushers us through the little back porch. You are immediately aware that this is no ordinary home. Every shelf, wall and table has a collection of objects. Rooms open one into another, and in one part of the house the roof soars two stories in height, lined with galleries stacked with books, trunks and cases.

There are glass-fronted bookcases with fine books, two beautiful grand pianos, china, paintings, curios, inlaid tables, stone jars, lanterns and muskets. There are historical records, original negatives of photographs from the 1860s, letters written in the earliest days of the settlement — the fine spider writing still clear and fresh.

In 1960 Mr Butler estimated that he had some 40,000 books; he now

W.W. MARCH 9, 1970

PICTURES BY  
PAUL ANDERSON

Reading in his living room. Behind Mr Butler, on the far wall, is one of his fine patchwork quilts. In the middle of the table in the background is the massive piece of greenstone. The Collard piano or "square" is to the right.



thinks this total has almost doubled. Wherever you look there are shelves of them. Nearly all are about New Zealand or by New Zealanders. In the galleries upstairs are trunks of 19th century clothes sealed against moth and mildew. You feel that out of this great pot-pourri whatever you asked to see Mr Butler would assuredly be able to produce, providing it had its origins before the 20th century.

As he led us through the house Mr Butler gave a running commentary: "That musket was used in Te Kooti's campaign. That's part of Carrington's dinner set . . . brought it out with him in the 'Brougham'."

Frederic Alonzo Carrington, a British surveyor, selected the site of New Plymouth for the Plymouth company and laid out the town in early 1841.

A long, finely linked chain, which Mr Butler has looped across his passage archway, is believed to be the chain Carrington used in his survey.

"That," a massive piece of greenstone, smoothly polished and

standing over a foot high in the middle of a table, "tipped off a Maori canoe off Opunake. Must have been in the sea bed for 80 or 90 years before they retrieved it. That's why it's so smooth. Came from a Maori pa. That's the treasure chest of the Taranaki Provincial Council — empty now as it was then."

A glass case housed greenstone artifacts. Here was pioneer cutlery and utensils. On into Mr Butler's bedroom. The double bed of kauri is more than 100 years old. The fine patchwork quilt was made by Mr Butler, as were the patterned woollen rugs on the floors throughout the house.

Perhaps the most bizarre relics were in this room. Opposite Mr Butler's bed is an age-blackened door with a small opening heavily covered with iron bars at the top and below a circular peep-hole burnt into the wood. This is the door from the first jail built at New Plymouth. Two skulls sit on the window sills behind the curtains. One is Maori — found in a paddock; the other, Mr Butler believes, is Chinese and may have

come from Suez. It belonged to his father.

About 1500 volumes, containing family trees of early settlers, are kept by Mr Butler. These he is constantly updating. "It becomes difficult," he admitted, "if people have daughters. Their daughters marry, the name changes, they have children and it takes a bit of catching up with."

Asked to single out one particular possession he treasured, Mr Butler didn't hesitate. "If I had to sell everything, I'd never part with my 'square'." He was referring to one of the grand pianos, which he emphasized should be called a "square." Made by J. C. Doring and Co., in 1789 this is a magnificent instrument with a solid rosewood top and beautiful fretwork panels.

Mr Butler happily sat down and played a passage to demonstrate that age had not impaired its quality.

The other grand piano — or "square" — is also a beautiful instrument, made, says Mr Butler,

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for Benjamin Disraeli in 1855 by the British firm Collard and Collard. Mr Butler believes the piano came to New Zealand in 1875.

I knew Mr Butler's house had been shifted from the city area to its rural site, but the mind fairly boggled at the task of transporting the contents.

"Simple," answered Mr Butler. "I brought most of it myself. Took me five months — 11 trips a day and not a drop of rain the whole time. I stored it all in the sheds. Once a carton of photographs was dropped. It was a windy day but I asked for help from the headmaster of the school. The children were chasing photographs all over the paddocks. A few photographs were run over by cars on the road but I got most of them back."

The house was built in Gill Street, New Plymouth, in 1923 for Mr Butler's parents. To move it, it was cut in half. When it was re-erected Mr Butler added a large slice in the middle, which includes the soaring two-storey high part. Appropriately for this part of the house, the double doors are 13 feet high and were acquired from the old Bank of New Zealand at the corner of Brougham and Devon Streets, New Plymouth.

Time is Mr Butler's biggest enemy. He finds his filing system impossible to keep up without assistance. Five years ago his house was broken into and five boxes of his index cards were

emptied on to the floor. In each box were some 500,000 cards. "I still haven't sorted these out," said Mr Butler.

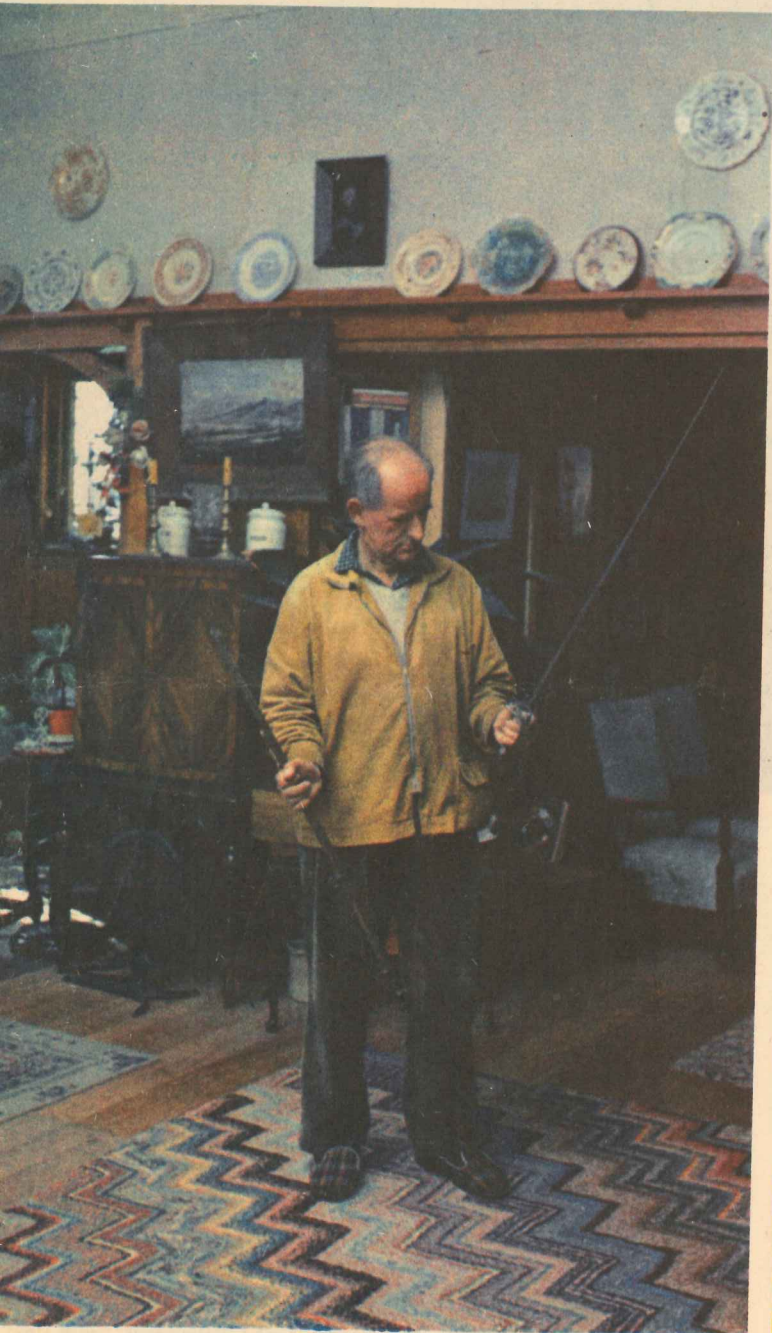
Now, because of his anxiety about the fate of all his records and historic articles, he is trying to form a trust to ensure that these will be preserved. "I may die in an hour, or a month or a year," said Mr Butler, "but whenever it is, it means that this house and everything in it could be untenanted for at least a week. Vandals could break in, anything could happen."

Ideally, Mr Butler hopes that the trust will be formed under the name of some permanent body such as the Government or a local body, and that interested people will come to his home and work on indexing and cataloguing.

"They could live here for a week or two and become familiar with the material," he said. "Then, when I died, there would be someone here able and ready to continue."

He would also like to see his five acres of ground planted in native trees and declared a bird sanctuary. In the shooting season he has pheasants and quail on his land apparently unperturbed by his cats — 13 in all. The cats are well-fed, which perhaps explains this.

When you drive away from the Butler home two clear impressions remain — you have seen a treasury of New Zealand history: Its preservation at present is the responsibility of one man alone. ●



Above: "This was the sword of one of the officers commanding the 'HMS Niger' in March, 1860." Mr Butler describes one of his possessions.



Right: "Books and more books"—a view of the high galleried two-story part of the house. Mr Butler is in the background.