

SECTION 2

It was in this modern warehouse at the foot of Currie Street that the foundations were laid for the remarkable expansion of the firm over the next 50 or so years - progress that was achieved in spite of the disruption to trade and industry by two World Wars and two depressions. Actually there were pessimists abroad before these shattering events occurred; their doubts about the future for Taranaki were based on the pending completion of the Main Trunk railway connecting Wellington and Auckland, an event which many feared would lead to the isolation of Taranaki. Until this railway was opened New Plymouth and its port were essential links in the traffic between the two centres. Express passenger trains ran almost daily between Wellington and New Plymouth connecting with three or four passenger ships on the New Plymouth-Onehunga run.

For a time something did seem to drop out of the life of New Plymouth. Undoubtedly the town appeared to have been left out on a limb, as it were, but it is doubtful if this setback was very serious; certainly it was only temporary, because about this time both the dairy and meat export industries were expanding and bringing money into all the towns of the province. The railways and the shipping companies were probably the principal losers.

If a page in the history of New Plymouth had disappeared it did not check the progress of Burgess, Fraser and Co, for in the first decade of this century it not only consolidated its early success but it prospered in the face of intense competition. In New Plymouth no fewer than six wholesale grocery companies operated. They were Burgess, Fraser and Co; Newton King (Wholesale) Ltd; J H Cock & Co Ltd; Masters Ltd; John Avery Ltd; and Burch & Co (New Plymouth) Ltd. As if this was not enough to cope with Burgess, Fraser and Co had to face equally keen competition in South Taranaki, where two Wellington-based companies, Levin and Co Ltd, and Johnston and Co Ltd, were firmly entrenched when Burgess, Fraser and Co opened a branch in Hawera in 1912.

This pattern of keenly competitive trading operated for many years and so - in the early 1900's it must have been with a feeling somewhat resembling relief that the founders of Burgess, Fraser and Co, now men in middle age, welcomed the emergence of two young men who were to strengthen the senior staff and in the years ahead to become most enterprising directors, expanding the company to South Taranaki and the Waikato. We have already met one, the

boy, Gordon Fraser, working in the old Brougham Street warehouse; the other was Sidney Burgess, a nephew of Charles. The founders had agreed at this time that each should have a successor in view, and the choice of Mr S Burgess was made because Charles had no family. It was a happy move; the temperaments of the two young men, both extremely capable and friendly, blended perfectly and over many years their inspiration and energy ensured the expansion of the firm.

It was about this period, 1909-1910, that the two "new boys" developed their training by working in the office and sharing periods "on the road" as travellers. In the meantime Mr Charles Burgess was firmly entrenched in charge of finance and general administration and he had brought from Auckland Mr Fred Asher, who became chief accountant and gave long and valuable service. It could be said that almost to the end of his life Mr Charles Burgess kept very close to the business, although he found time to give long service to the town of his adoption. But for the next 25 years of his life Mr Murdoch Fraser moved at a more leisurely pace. He never forgot the customers who had given him his first orders and made frequent visits to them "just", as he used to say, "to see how they are getting along with the new boys." He, too, gave many years' public service and made numerous trips abroad, meeting first the firm's benefactor in Scotland. He appointed London buyers, an essential link in those days, because New Zealand had not then developed the wide range of secondary industries which exist today. A large proportion of the firm's needs had to be imported; today that trade is very small.

That Mr Fraser never lost an opportunity to mix business with pleasure is shown in at least two instances which are worth recording. Returning from a trip to England just before the first World War he broke his journey in Ceylon to stay with a tea planter friend who had a small estate upcountry. A keen judge of tea Mr Fraser had always taken a special interest in the firm's tea department, and he was so impressed by the quality of this planter's product that he said he would buy the whole output. A deal was completed and for many years Taranaki and Waikato tea drinkers had the exclusive enjoyment of a beverage of the finest quality. Unfortunately, for various reasons, this trade "folded up" some years ago. Many years later, when he was over 80, Mr Fraser set off on another trip. this time to California, and before he returned he had completed a very lucrative contract for the importation by the firm of onions and apples, his last contribution to the firm he had helped to establish. A year later, in 1928, he died. Mr Charles Burgess was to live until 1938.

It is now time to turn back to Currie Street. The year is 1912 and the firm is about to take an important step forward, primarily inspired by the confidence of "the new blood". It was decided to open a branch in Hawera in spite of the fact that it was recognised that keen competition would be met from such powerful Wellington firms as Johnston and Co, and Levin and Co, which had branches in Hawera and whose operations included the sale of groceries. Mr Sidney Burgess was chosen to open and manage the branch and he made an immediate success of the venture. He had had a sound business training and was very popular with the numerous customers he was to secure in South Taranaki. Two years later came the First World War and in 1915 Mr Burgess joined the forces, went overseas and served in France, and eventually returned to New Zealand to resume his business career. He was appointed a director of the company in the New Plymouth head office and in that capacity he gave long and valuable service.

Although primarily concerned with the general policy of the company Mr Sidney Burgess continued to take a special interest in the South Taranaki operations which he had launched and it was with justifiable pride that he saw this branch of the business expand and prosper. Always a supporter of progress he was equally energetic in his advocacy, in co-operation with Mr Gordon Fraser, of the later move into the Waikato, of which we will read later. Ill-health forced his retirement in 1945 but he continued to attend the annual meetings of the company until a few years before his death in 1976 at the age of 87.

The first warehouse in Hawera, if it could justify the title, was a small building which was leased until the growth of the business made larger premises necessary. But Hawera, like New Plymouth, was faced with a multitude of difficulties caused by the disruption of normal trading during the four years of the First World War and by the recession which followed the end of hostilities. This recession was primarily due to the British Government ending the commandeering of New Zealand's dairy produce and meat and the consequent disappearance of the fat cheques which the bulk purchase scheme had brought to the producers. But with the gradual improvement in the outlook and the confidence of the directors of Burgess, Fraser and Co, unimpaired, a block of land was purchased in Union Street, Hawera, and a modern warehouse and office block were erected.

Some years earlier, in 1918, the partners had formed the business into a private company and the first directors were Messrs C Burgess (chairman), M Fraser, G Fraser and S Burgess. It is interesting to record that in this

age of take-overs and the disappearance of many old-established family businesses Burgess, Fraser and Co, is still privately owned, largely by the descendants of Murdoch Fraser; that another Murdoch Fraser, a grandson of the founder, is today the managing director, and all the directors, with two exceptions, are descendants of the first Murdoch Fraser.

With the passing of the recession, business in Taranaki continued to expand but this renewed expansion was again interrupted by the world-wide depression of 1929-31. Although many small businesses suffered a set back Burgess, Fraser and Co, not only survived but had consolidated its position so firmly that it was in a stronger condition than many firms to face the upsets to normal trading caused by the Second World War, which broke out in 1939 and continued for four years. Never before in the history of what is still a comparatively young country had commercial enterprise in New Zealand been faced with a period of such disruption as that caused by depressions and wars, but while some firms were forced to close or to restrict their operations, Burgess, Fraser and Co not only survived but in the years ahead made a dramatic advance, assisted to some extent by the disappearance of almost all of its competitors.

In 1937 Masters Ltd, closed its grocery department and in 1952 Burch and Co sold out to Taranaki Farmers' Co-op Wholesale. In 1963 A S Paterson and Co Ltd, of Wellington, took over the New Plymouth business of J H Cock and Co Ltd, and subsequently that of Newton King (Wholesale) Ltd. In 1973 Burgess, Fraser and Co took over the New Plymouth business of A S Paterson and Co and also the grocery operations of both Levin and Co and Johnston and Co in Hawera. This left Taranaki with Burgess, Fraser and Co the one independent wholesaler and a co-operative in the form of Foodstuffs Co-op Wellington Society Ltd.

The firm had advanced a long way, consolidating and expanding its grip on the trade of Taranaki, but while all this was happening an even more spectacular move had been made - in 1927 the firm opened, in Barton Street, Hamilton's first wholesale grocery warehouse. The door was wide open for their coming, as it had been in New Plymouth many years before, because until then no Auckland general merchant had considered opening a branch warehouse in Hamilton, being content to service the needs of the area from Auckland.

But, strange as it may seem today, the decision to go to Hamilton nearly wrecked the partnership. Mr Gordon Fraser had made many visits to the Waikato to get the feel of the district and became convinced, as has since proved

correct, that there was a great future for Hamilton and the surrounding region. He said they should go in and go quickly while the field was clear. Mr Charles Burgess strongly opposed the move, contending that they did not have the resources and should concentrate in Taranaki. Mr Murdoch Fraser's health was failing at this time and he merely observed from the sideline, but it is known that he gave this advice to his partner: "These two young chaps (referring to his son Gordon and Mr Sidney Burgess) are making more money in a month than you and I made in a year so why not leave them to it." Mr Sidney Burgess was in a tight spot - he was fully in favour of the move, but could he go against his uncle who had brought him into the firm?

What was a clever bluff settled the issue. After much discussion Mr Gordon Fraser threw in his challenge - if the firm was not going to Hamilton he would retire and establish his own business in New Plymouth and Hamilton. That did not suit Mr Charles Burgess and eventually he reluctantly agreed, and the move to Hamilton was made. Mr Gordon Fraser and Mr Sidney Burgess shared the early task of organising the new branch and appointed Mr Tom Shaw as the first manager. The faith that the directors had in the Hamilton venture has been well justified; today the firm is strongly established in Barton and Anglesea Streets, owning a block of one acre in the heart of the city, and in addition to the main warehouse it operates an extensive self-service department. This latter activity, then a comparatively new form of trading, was an immediate success, welcomed by customers who were able to select and move purchases out without delay, and clearing the way for the more prompt despatch of heavy goods. Mr Tom Shaw, who we met as a boy joining the firm in its very early days, continued as manager until his retirement in 1955 - a long period of most valuable service.

With all this expansion to be consolidated and developed the firm was fortunate at this time to have such enterprising and experienced directors as Mr Gordon Fraser and Mr Sidney Burgess, supported by capable branch managers and their loyal staffs, for there was plenty of trouble ahead - the depression of the 'thirties mentioned before and the Second World War. A less firmly established business could have foundered; many did, but just as it had survived the earlier disruptions to normal trading so once again it emerged intact and the way became clear for further expansion, this time in New Plymouth, but the project had to await more settled conditions.

It became clear in the years following the Second World War that the warehouse



in Currie Street and a store for bulk goods further along the street were inadequate to cope with the growth of trade and plans were discussed for yet another move. The directors recognised the need and if they showed any hesitation in launching this project it was soon dispersed for by now another young man was to join the firm, bringing enthusiasm and a progressive outlook. He is another Murdoch Fraser, the son of Gordon and the grandson of the first Murdoch. He joined the firm in 1939 after spending some years with Wellington merchants, he interrupted his training to serve overseas in the Second World War, in which he was wounded, and later he went into the head office of Burgess, Fraser and Co, in New Plymouth. Over the years since then he has revealed all the ability and vigour of his father; he was made a director when the firm was still in Currie Street and today is the managing director, the principal architect of the progressive policy upon which the firm is now moving forward.

If there was any hesitation by the directors regarding the provision of a new and modern warehouse none was shown by Mr Murdoch Fraser and he played a leading part with the other directors in planning the new building programme.

Over the next twenty-odd years, while the firm moved steadily forward, there were changes in the overall control. In 1945 Mr Sidney Burgess retired because of ill-health but retained his directorship and almost up to the time of his death he attended the annual meetings and always kept in close touch with important developments in the business. Following this retirement Mr Guy Macallan, a son-in-law of Mr Gordon Fraser, joined the firm, bringing a wide experience in his legal profession and in mercantile finance, which enabled him to make an important contribution to the control of the firm's ever-widening transactions. He is now chairman of directors and in that capacity gives valuable guidance in the general problems of administration.

About this time Mr Gordon Fraser began to take a less active part in the business, the general direction of which was now firmly in the hands of his son Murdoch, to whom both he and Mr Sidney Burgess had already given their full support to the plan for new premises. Before Mr Gordon Fraser died in 1958 his brother, Mr Hugh Fraser, the only surviving member of Mr Murdoch Fraser's family, was appointed to the board, and recently Mr John McGrath and Mr Euan Macallan, both great-grandsons of Mr Murdoch Fraser, were appointed.

Returning to the decision to build a new warehouse in New Plymouth it was considered prudent to mark time for a period to await the return of more

normal conditions, but in the meantime an important step was taken, although only a small one compared with what was to come later. Because the establishment of a wholesale self-service department in the Hamilton warehouse had proved so successful, it was decided to provide a similar service for the firm's New Plymouth customers, and in late 1960 this modern type of trading commenced in premises in Tarahua Road, on the outskirts of the city. It was an immediate popular success, but it soon met the same fate that overtook every building that Burgess, Fraser and Co, had occupied - it was too small for the growing trade so that, and the congestion in the Currie Street building, made the early provision of a large modern warehouse, including a self-service department, essential.

Two years later, in 1962, on a site at the corner of Gill Street and Gover Street, New Plymouth, the directors made the most enterprising advance in the history of the firm - the erection of a large two-storey warehouse equipped with the most modern facilities for the handling of goods, and, adjoining the main block, another spacious building to house the greatly expanded wholesale self-service operations. The firm's carriers deliver all orders for New Plymouth customers, while the public carrier and rail service take goods as far north as Pio Pio, east to Matiere, and as far south as Opunake. Retailers further north are looked after by the Hamilton branch and those further south by the Hawera branch. The handling of the large quantities of goods passing in and out of the New Plymouth warehouse is facilitated by the use of the most modern materials handling equipment and the spacious offices are provided with the latest aids to speed and efficiency made available in this, the computer age.

Throughout its existence the company has remained privately owned, largely by descendants of the first Murdoch Fraser, and the present board of directors is, with one exception, very much family. It comprises Messrs Guy Macallan, a son-in-law of Gordon Fraser (chairman), Murdoch Fraser, son of Gordon (managing director), Hugh Fraser, the last survivor of the original Fraser family, John McGrath and Euan Macallan, great-grandsons of the first Murdoch Fraser, and Hugh O'Connor, who is also the company secretary.

While the chief credit for the building of this most successful enterprise must be given to its founders and their successors such a notable achievement would not have been possible without the long and loyal service given by the staff in the head office and the two branches. If some have been forgotten it is only because so many have come and gone, early records have been lost,

and memories are inclined to fade. Many gave loyal service for 50 years and over and several served, often with distinction, in the World Wars. We have already met some of the pioneers, such as Messrs Tom Shaw, Dick White, Bill Hughes, Frank Pinson and Fred Asher. The last-named was a long serving accountant until he was followed by Mr J M Poynter. Most of these have died. Here is a list of today's executives and other long-serving employees, some still active and others retired, and not necessarily in order of seniority :

Mr Hugh B O'Connor ACA: Started business career with Woolworths Ltd. Joined Burgess, Fraser and Co, as accountant in 1954; appointed secretary in 1974 and a director in 1978.

Mr F W Liley MC, ED: Chief accountant at head office in New Plymouth. Joined J H Cock and Co, in 1930; later proprietor of A Fleming and Co; joined Burgess, Fraser and Co, when it absorbed the business of Fleming and Co; appointed chief accountant in 1974.

Mr C H Wood: Manager New Plymouth branch. Joined the firm in 1945; appointed manager 1977 after being in charge of the self-service department.

Mr G P Doyle: Manager of the Hamilton branch. Started in the Hawera branch in 1961; sales manager in New Plymouth 1974; appointed to Hamilton 1975.

Mr H C Old: Joined Hamilton branch as a clerk in 1936; now assistant manager at Hamilton.

Mr B Larsen: Manager of the Hawera branch. Joined firm in 1976; promoted from assistant manager to manager 1978.

Mr M A Bell: Joined firm in 1926; manager at Hawera; transferred to manager at Hamilton 1955; retired 1975.

Mr A D Grattan: Joined Hamilton branch 1937; retired 1974.

Mr D Dawson: Joined New Plymouth branch 1925; Hamilton and Rotorua traveller 1950 to 1974; retired.

Mr D Park: Joined Hawera staff as a storeman in 1956; rose to assistant manager and later manager.

Mr R A Wall: Joined firm as storeman and truck driver 1919; appointed King Country traveller 1943; retired 1967.



Two members of the staff who, like many others, gave long and valuable service, were the most recent retirements. They were :

Mr Clive Shaw: Joined the firm in 1924; sales manager at head office 1934 until he retired in 1974.

Mr David H Rawson MBE: Joined the firm in 1932; country traveller 1952; manager of Hawera branch 1953; established the self-service departments at Hamilton and New Plymouth; New Plymouth manager 1968; company sales director 1974; retired 1977.