

## At the Apple & Pear Board (Enza)

In 1981 we had moved to Havelock North after selling our orchard. I needed something to do and the APB advertised for a Packhouse Manager. Many thought I was going out of the frying pan into the fire. I went to the Board Office, can't remember if it was Tony Cross or Mike Gay, anyway I got the job.

The packhouse was in the Parker Building with coolstores very handy. My office was very small adjacent to a larger office used by the outside boss, Taki Johnson. I intended to interview and hire my own staff. The packhouse had been in operation for some years and there was talk that it was going to be replaced. Fruit from the coolstores was carted by electric forklifts to a waterdump thence past a grading table onto the sizer and onto large circular rotating tables. Packers wrapped the fruit into cartons placed them on a conveyor which fed a lidding machine and then manually stacked on pallets and carted to coolstore. All pretty conventional. From memory there would have been fifteen to twenty people involved. Many had been working in the packhouse for some years. I soon found out that Taki had a lot of influence in the packhouse, the staff included a lot of his relatives, his mother-in-law, his daughter, sister, and others.

On the very first day of operations, I was watching how things were going, a pretty young maori girl called Luana seemed to be aimlessly wandering about, I asked her what her job was and she said she was a packer, I immediately invited her to take her place as a packer. The next thing that seemed odd to me was that at the first lunch break the place smelt like a dining room. I discovered that the bloke looking after the lidding machine (Harry) had a hot plate plugged in with his vegetables boiling away nicely, whether he had prepared them during the morning I don't know, the APB did not seem to have any control over their own setup. The quality and weight of the finished product interested me. There was plenty to think about in this setup. There was a timeclock which recorded everybody's arrival and departure, a smoko room, a very helpful tea lady (Barbara Oppett), and toilets right on the job. The APB accepted lots of bins of loose fruit and that was the fruit we would pack both for export and local market. The place needed some new blood and some of the existing people needed to wake their ideas up or else!!!! The first area was the grading table, we had to get the grades right, graders had a difficult job and the bins varied greatly. Among the men, it seemed the old hands had the easier jobs and the newer men did the more physical work. I wanted to change that, they needed to be able to do one another's jobs, then if someone was missing you could more readily fill in. Among the men I had the head Union man for the whole APB. There were engineers available to fix machinery if it broke down.

Slowly changes were made. The ligger man had resigned, I had employed some new labour, appointed a Senior Lady (Mary Whatarau) which proved a great help. I had the services of the engineers and one in particular (Charlie Sutherland) helped me to get the sizing part of the old grader a bit better. I think everybody knew the packhouse had a new boss and it was not Taki Johnson.

\* - *no longer had to wrap each apple*

In the early 1980's news came through that Don Wilson (Chief Engineer of the Apple & Pear Board) had purchased new equipment for the Hastings Branch. It was to be built around the concept of a large sizer plant enabling the packhouse to pack presized fruit. The position of Manager of both plants was advertised in the local paper, maybe elsewhere as well, I am not sure. I did not apply, Tony Cross (local Manager) contacted me as the applications were closing to say my name was not in his list, I then sort of knew that if I applied I would get the job. I was in my sixties (35 to 45 age group preferred in job advert) and knew there probably would be plenty of problems with the new equipment. The new sizing plant was manufactured by the Penwalt Corporation in California., and was to be computer controlled. The foreman of the Pre Sizer was appointed by the Board, he was David Renouf a person I did not know and had never

met. There was to be three Board Engineers involved with the setup, Rodger Bartle ( Senior) ,Jack Black (Packhouse) Lorrie O'dongahue (Pre Sizer). Fork Lift drivers as required by the Pre Sizer would come from the yard drivers. I would staff all the rest of the people. Don Wilson the head engineer, resigned before the operation was completed and he was replaced by Colin Stanley.

I never asked how much the Pre Sizer facility cost but with a new building specially for it the complex and packhouse machinery must have been millions. The installation of the Pre Sizer in its new building was undertaken by the Boards engineers, local contractors and a representative American from the Penwalt Co. I watched with keen interest of course and rubbed shoulders very closely with the Penwalt man, because this concept was completely new to me. The Board had installed a smaller unit in Auckland and several of us made a visit there to familize us with Penwalt gear. The plant was designed to put though 600 bins in pretty quick time. There was a large automatic stacked system of feeding the bins into the water dump feeding four large grading tables which feed the fruit through a colour sorter onto electronic sizing mechanisms onto sixteen lanes of fruit into huge water filled flumes feeding a huge bin filling operation using a system of filling the bins underwater via a downavator. Magnificent if it all works okay!!!!

The day came when it was ready to go. The vital thing was the sizing of the fruit. I had worked out what the weight of individual apples needed to be to give us the finished carton weight when packed. My judgement of the machine's accuracy was that it was not very good. I was able to telephone the USA and speak with the Vice President of the Penwalt Co. I will always remember his words. He told me "Fred we build them you fly them". I had got the message. In discussions with the local APB heads, we needed boosting in the electronics area. I think some of the APB heads thought you simply rang the Penwalt firm and they would solve the problems. I felt we needed to solve our own problems right here in Hastings. We needed our own electronic expert right here and quickly because a setup as big as the Pre sizer would quickly cause big wastage if not going right. (my thinking was simply based on the fact that this gear has it sizing done electronically, new to us, and we had to get on top of that issue) I had the job of getting our computer expert. My link with radio only amounted to Amateur Radio in retirement years, but it had kept me linked to knowing of local people involved with those type of jobs. I had observed one young man who now worked for Tisco servicing TVs etc. I had a chat with him about our setup, the APB wanted someone with the knowledge needed to service our gear on call when the pre sizer was operating. We came to an amicable agreement, As it turned out this was a major gain, his name was Phil Crook and it gave him a base to set up his own business. I wanted him to get vital information from the Penwalt man in Hastings before he returned to the States. There were no Penwalt agents in NZ and some of the computer information was secret only to them, but our man had to have access to it. That approval was given to Phil and we were getting somewhere. I think after I left the APB Phil actually went to the US furthering his own computer knowledge.

Then began the job of improving the accuracy of our equipment. One of the major areas of interest was to better temperature control vital parts of the gear, the main consoles in the original plan had placed those units in a central position subject to whatever temperature the large open space was. It was decided to build a temperature controlled room to house those units next to the control room. Another area of great concern was the load cells where the apples were weighed and then travelled to their respective flumes. Some sort of temperature control was needed there. Slowly improvements were made. But it took lots of time. We also had to establish some sort of checking system on the sizing as the machine was running, I used to don gumboots and spend much time in the flumes checking fruit size before it went into bins. We eventually mounted an accurate weighing set up in the flume area

Setting grading standards and getting a large number of trained people up to standard was not easy. Appointing a senior lady for the presizer was not a simple issue, grading is the most difficult job in a packhouse. To finish up with top quality fruit, mostly you have to grade hard, too hard? Even when growers are given a 100 per cent grading at the loose fruit inspection area, I doubt it has nil rejection in the presizer. Conditions for the workers in the presizer were made as good as possible, with smoko room and toilets right next door and a large mobile heater when the building got cold. Constant improvements were the name of the game, and it was challenging!!!

Now we come to the Packhouse. It had to be totally stripped of all the old setup. A waterdump and flume to the grading table was established. From grading table fruit could be fed either to the carton line or to the crate fillers. With the passing of having to individually wrap the fruit in tissue paper, we now were able to feed the fruit straight on to trays thence into the cartons. The full cartons then went through the carton sealer over the scales and stacked on pallets. We would be either carton packing or crate filling, the crates were automatically filled to the right weight then a cardboard topper inserted and stacked on pallets. Crates were of course only for the local NZ market. Like the presizer the packhouse was constantly being modified for improvements. A second floor was built above the packing area to house the pallets of unformed cartons and there the cartons were formed and feed on conveyors to the packing floor. We had plenty of visitors including many from overseas to watch our operations.

The green plastic crates were returnable and had to be washed. This was done through a crate washing machine which was housed outside the Packer Store on the north side.

The petrol pump for Board vehicles was by the main door of the Parker Store and the key for this pump was kept in my office. So there were people from the Board chairman down visiting my office very frequently. My office was broken into on one occasion, I wondered whether that key was the target, but never really found out. During my period at the Board, Taki Johnson was moved to another office outside in the yard and another larger office was built for me and the Senior Lady. I also had another office in the Presizer and used a bike to move between the two sites.

The Presizer only operated during the harvest season of the apple industry, so a job there was only for that period. David Renouf and the Engineer were the only people who had full employment. The Packhouse operated at full volume a bit longer to get the export fruit away, then it was doing local market requirements. There came a day when the staff numbers had to be reduced, this was a soul searching time to decide who went and who stayed. You had built up all season trying to have a team spirit and how do you decide who stays. Not easy.

My time as Packhouse and Presizer manager came to an end in April 1988 I was invited to sit in on the discussions that took place about my replacement. Tony Cross wanted me to take a seasonal job in the field staff of the laboratory, vehicle provided etc. which I continued to do for a few years until April 1994.

My time at the APB is probably better judged by others, but it is interesting to think that it combined my interests in fruit growing and harvesting and my earlier training in radio which is the parent of computers.

Interesting items missed.....

The Head Union man who worked in the Packhouse. His surname was Whakaruru, was away for some reason, I had read in the Union Rules that if a person was absent for more than a certain period and did not make an attempt to contact his employer he could be dismissed. So I dismissed the above gentleman, it did not go unnoticed by the Union and things were a bit electric for a while.

My links with Union officials eventually were quite good. One of the heads of the Union came to me to see if he could bring his family and visit the presizer plant.

It's sad to relate that only a few years after I left the APB that everything in the fruit industry changed, the local market had to change, but one organization like the Board for exporting has much merit I felt.

In the Pre Sizer, getting the grading standards correct was a very demanding job, appointing a senior in that department took quite a while. Eventually that position was filled by Queenie Papera. Bin fruit from one orchard might be high grade, but many bins had a lot of maginal stuff. Export standards demanded high quality fruit. A grader has to apply themselves 100 per cent, very demanding...

It was great for Enza to always be remembered in the great America's Cup victory by Peter Blake and his crew with the Enza emblem flying proudly on the spinnaker sail.

\* Bulk handling of apples came about when the use of wrapping each apple was changed.