

The Yarrows Story - A Slice of History

Noel Yarrow was raised in the Manaia bakery that has become his life.

But that early business was a mere crumb compared with the major breadwinner the south Taranaki factory has become.

In fact, the premises where Noel took his first steps wasn't even big enough to bake in.

In 1923, Alfred Henry and Grace Helen Yarrow left a small family bakery they had set up several years earlier in Turakina. Their move took them to Manaia, where they bought a bakery from a Mr Farmer.

At the rear of the shop, there was a tiny bakehouse, but this was not useable. Instead, all the bread and cakes were made in a bakery down the street and brought back to A.H. Yarrow Ltd by horse and cart.



Noel & Don, with over 100 years of baking experience

The Yarrow family's life revolved around the bakery, which included a retail area, teashop and living quarters out the back.

A year after arriving in the south Taranaki town, Grace gave birth to Noel, the fourth and last of her children.

Noel was born in a maternity home on Riemenschneider Street, just a couple of houses away from the home he now shares with wife Melva.

Hard labour

Noel, now aged 84, is still working full-time in the bakery where he was brought up. He has also overseen major extensions to the factory, bringing it into the 21st century.

But it has only just dawned on him that the family bakery has turned into something huge.

That realisation came to him one winter afternoon following the funeral of an old-time Manaia resident and long-time supporter of the bakery. Noel left the farewell in a reflective mood and stopped.

There, before him was the giant, ever-growing Yarrows factory. He stood still and stared, like a child seeing the Disneyland castle in real life. "I saw the length of the factory and quite frankly, that was the first time I had really noticed how big the operation is. I just thought 'goodness, we've got a big building'."

Such instants happen to busy people, ones so involved in doing they forget to stop and look at the big picture.

But then Yarrows have always worked long hours.

"We were open from 6am until 10 at night," Noel says of those early days. "Of course we were open on a Saturday. My parents did catering as well."

The roles were well defined. Alf Yarrow worked in the bakery and did the administration. Grace Yarrow worked in the shop and eventually daughter Berriss joined her. Eldest child Joyce worked in the house, third-born Howard (known as Hec) joined his dad in the bakery, and, eventually, so did Noel.

In 1928, the original bakery was built out the back of the house, so the entire business was on one site.

Noel was just a four-year-old then, but as he got older he learnt to help.

"When I was a youngster I used to feed the fowls, pick up the eggs and the potatoes for my father to make the yeast from." The spuds were grown in a quarter-acre section out the back, beside the chicken house.

"In those days, we didn't have a washing machine. I used to cut the kindling to feed the copper. Before I went to school I would deliver a basket of bread to the local hotels. It was just a job like delivering papers, which I did when I was a teenager."

Lessons of life

Between bites of dainty sandwiches made with just-baked Yarrows bread, Noel says he dreamed of going to university in England. "I intended to further my education, but the war intervened."

Noel never got to fight in World War II, even though he was in the army. He trained for three years, and was about to leave for operations in the Pacific.

"I was on final leave at the time the war finished. I celebrated the end of the war and my 21st at the same time."

Noel admits, at the time, he was disappointed about missing the chance to fight. "I realise I was lucky now."

Even the bakery was ravaged by the distant war.

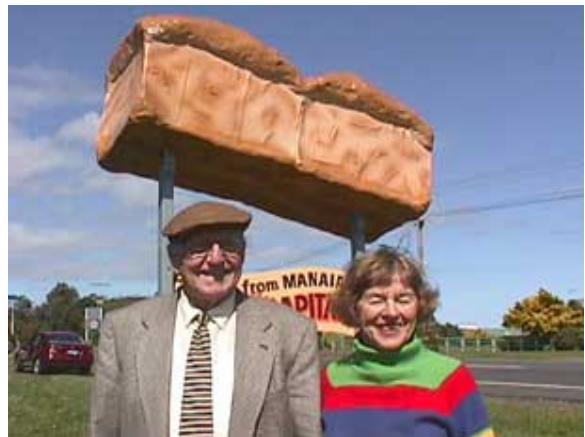
"The family business had been decimated with the staff going to war and so, when I finished with the army I went straight into the bakery. In those days you helped out your parents."

During the next six years, Noel and Hec learned the business.

The most important lessons their father taught them were about contributing to the community and adopting new technology.

"My mother and father were very involved in the community. Within a very short time of arriving in Manaia, my father went on the Manaia Town Board," Noel says.

Alf Yarrow was a JP and a probation officer for the court. "He would take over young people in the area and tried to bring these people back on to a level keel," Noel says. "My mother and father also did some counselling."



Toast of the Town: Noel and Melva Yarrow by the loaf raised in their honour at Manaia.

Noel's wife Melva says her late father-in-law helped the youngsters in practical ways. "He would take them on in the bakery and put them on the night-shift. Those boys never got into trouble because they were working at night and too tired to get into trouble during the day.

"Many of them became qualified bakers and fine, upstanding citizens in the community," she says.

Noel has also taken a risk with workers and reaped the rewards. "One of our employees came to me and asked if I could provide a job for her son. He was a little devil. I said 'yes, we will give him a chance'."

The lad was interviewed and Noel, told him: "Yes, we will give you a job, but the first time you step out of line you're down the road.

"He took a job and went right through and was one of our top apprentices. Now he's working overseas."

Taste of technology

As well as trusting people, the Yarrows have put faith in modern machinery.

Alf Yarrow did that at the start of WWII. "My father was one of the first people in New Zealand to put a mechanical mixer in and one of the first in Taranaki to put in a bread moulder," Noel says.

"Dad would have been called an entrepreneur today. In those days, we just thought of him as forward-looking."

Other improvements followed.

"We were the first in Taranaki to put a flour silo in and people thought we were mad," Noel says.

In 1952, Alf died unexpectedly, leaving Hec and Noel to run the business.

They did their dad proud, continuing to upgrade, and update. "We brought people over from Holland and Britain, we brought skills in, like New Plymouth is doing now with the engineers, but we were doing it in the 1950s."

The fresh expertise was passed on to others in the bakery. Therefore, when the overseas employees left, their skills were retained by the Manaia workers.

Also in the 1950s, the Yarrows tapped into other revolutionary ideas - egg pulp and compressed yeast. The pulp saved the need to crack hundreds of eggs, while the compressed yeast sped up the baking process.

From 1960 to 1968, there were about three minor extensions to the factory.

In 1998, compressed yeast was replaced by liquid yeast, delivered twice weekly by tanker in 10,000-litre deliveries from Auckland.

Pushing boundaries

During the 18 years the brothers ran the company, they went way beyond physical extensions. "We took the business from a Manaia bakery to a South Taranaki bakery," says Noel.

"We had a radius of about five miles based around Manaia until 1950. From 1950 to '68 we expanded our delivery to Hawera and Patea."

In 1968, Hec "retired", leaving Noel and Melva to run the bakery.

But Hec didn't put his feet up that year.

"We extended ourselves up to New Plymouth and my brother worked for us for two or three years at our New Plymouth delivery depot in Borrell Ave," Noel says.

Meanwhile, the husband-and-wife team continued to nurture the growing bakery, with three more additions up until 1980.

There were more extensions in 1993, 1995, 1998 and 2002. These involved extending the factory floor space, building new holding freezers and new staff facilities.

"We were fortunate to have our mother until '91 and she was thrilled to see the business develop."

Grace Yarrow died in her 99th year.

Standing in a gleaming, metallic area, where staff members wash their hands, Noel points: "That used to be my bedroom."



Bread maker: The modern Yarrow's factory, Manaia.

This one statement hurtles him back in time, and for a moment he stands seeing a vision of his childhood.

Thinking bigger

"It's grown like Topsy; the whole place," he says, and leads on to the old BNZ bank.

When the bank closed down, the Yarrow's brought it, because "we were bursting at the seams". This is now used for storing records, staff training and is home to the Yarrow's test bakery and boardroom.

In the meeting place, large aerial photographs of the bakery's progress grace the walls.

The first is a black-and-white shot showing the town intact, with the Yarrow empire contained in a single property. The last, taken recently, shows the extent of the bread-making industry. Now it takes up the equivalent of five shopfronts, has a huge storehouse across the road, and among the nest of on-site buildings is a new giant bakery.

Standing in an enclosed viewing platform above the latest addition, it's like a scene from a sci-fi movie. But instead of a test-run of gleaming weapons or soldier clones, the proto-types are golden loaves of bread.

To house the soaring machinery, the building is as tall as an aircraft hangar and roomy enough for planes. However, the area will be filled with bagged-up bread, not flying machines.

Wages of love

"Our greatest achievement has been to provide a large amount of work for young people in the area and, really, to start these people off with the standards Melva and I have had."

The Yarrow's factory operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week, with the bakehouse staff working four-day weeks and 12-hour shifts. The company employs 250 people in Manaia and upwards of 150 people through New Zealand and Australia.

Noel and Melva's son, Paul, is part of the bakery's hierarchy. Paul, who is based in Auckland, is the company's Managing Director.

The Yarrows will always be on the rise.