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## A century of service to agriculture

### Coolstores' vital role in growth of Taranaki dairy industry

By Farming Editor  
**BARRY EASTON**

THERE were no fanfares to mark the occasion, but a small slice of Taranaki dairying history slipped quietly into oblivion last month.

The seven-member Taranaki Co-operative Cool Store board held its last meeting on June 16.

Technically, the board was already out of a job because the New Zealand Dairy Board had taken total control of the New Plymouth cool stores on June 1.

The Dairy Board has owned the cool stores since 1981, but in an arrangement which was unique to Taranaki, it allowed representatives from the local dairy industry to administer its operations as well as have a minor financial interest in its affairs, says Neil Leuthart, chairman of the now defunct cool stores board.

The Taranaki association was ended by mutual agreement, he says.

"The Dairy Board monitors its products at all ports of export, and the move was made to ensure a uniform standard of quality control.

"It was part of the (1981) sale agreement that Taranaki dairy companies would be given a shareholding, these being termed the 'A' shares. These were granted to enable dairy companies, which were responsible for running the facility, to receive a small proportion of the sundry income. This also ensured that the cool stores could be run in the most efficient manner possible."

Along with Port Taranaki, the cool stores have been a cornerstone in the development of the province's dairy industry, says Mr Leuthart.

While the Taranaki Producers' Freezing Works Company Ltd, as it was originally named, was founded in 1901, the works' beginnings date back to 1895, when a private company erected the first building. A rather unpretentious structure by modern standards, it was sufficient for the needs of the day. The

company, called the Taranaki Freezing Works Company Ltd had a board of directors comprising Messrs J. B. Connett (chairman), Newton King, William Bayly, Henry J. Okey, Walter Bewley, William J. Gray and Hugh Irvine. The secretary was J. S. McKellar.

The building site was steeped in history. They stood where the Otaka or Ngamotu pa once stood.

In February, 1832, this was besieged by Waikato Maoris. The battle lasted three weeks.

An account by the late W. H. Skinner written for S. Percy Smith's History and Traditions of the Maoris of the West Coast, tells of how Whare-pouri, leader of the besieged Atiawa, withstood the superior firepower of the invading forces. Their key tactic was to trade!

"Strange and incredible as it may seem, while all the fighting and bloodshed was going on around the pa, within, a brisk trade was carried on between the traders and their friends and the enemy," says the report.

"The Waikato invaders possessed between 3000 to 4000 muskets while the besieged could muster scarcely 100 of these weapons.

"Consequently there was a keen demand for them within the pa, and in exchange for blankets, tobacco, and other articles which the Waikatots coveted, the supply of muskets and powder was quickly built up.

"On one occasion while a brisk business was being carried on between the opposing parties, a dispute arose and three Waikatots were killed. Their bodies were immediately cut up and roasted."

At the turn of the century, the growing and developing co-operative dairy companies recognised the importance of owning essential services like refrigeration and storage. In this field Taranaki led the way.

The old proprietary company had owned and operated the works at Moturoa for five seasons, when representatives of the dairy companies met and

decided to make an offer for the works. The price was £15,266.10.10 (\$30,533.10).

The Taranaki Producers' Freezing Works Company Ltd was registered on May 13, 1901. In the same year, South Taranaki dairy companies erected their freezing works alongside the wharf at Patea, and so established the West Coast Refrigerating Company.

The lead taken in Taranaki was followed in other centres. Auckland Farmers Freezing Company built similar facilities soon after, followed by the Co-operative Dairy Producers' Freezing Company at Wellington in 1919, the Otago Dairy Producers' Cool Storage Co Ltd at Dunedin, and later still, the Southland Cool Stores at Bluff.

When the Taranaki company started in July, 1901, the capacity of the works was 14,000 boxes of butter and 5000 cases of cheese. During its first year of trading it handled 176,210 boxes of butter and 9530 cases of cheese.

The works were destroyed by fire on the night of May 10, 1904, and the replacement buildings, some parts of which are still standing, were constructed in brick and lined in cork. The new buildings were able to handle 26,000 boxes of butter and 8,000 cases of cheese.

In the formative years of the dairy industry, butter for export was classified under three headings:-

- Creamery butter, which was manufactured in factories or creameries
- Dairy butter, which was made on the properties of individual farmers and exported under their own brands
- Milled butter, which was a mixture of various farm brands purchased by the milling firms and blended

Creamery butter at this period was considered to have its keeping qualities enhanced by the retention of the lowest possible percentage of water, and with the facilities at their disposal factory managers were able to keep the moisture content of their butter at or about what was considered the safe minimum.

Dairy farmers, however, lacked proper facilities and found great difficulty in regulating the water content with the result that variations ranging from 10% water to 20% plus were found.

Milled butter being a blend of dairy brands was more uniform in quality and moisture.

Cheese in earlier times, was made from milk averaging 3.7% to 3.8% fat, but as the fat content of the milk gradually rose, it was thought that some of this could be removed without seriously affecting the quality of the cheese.

This led to the standardisation experiment, which started in 1929 and finished in 1932.

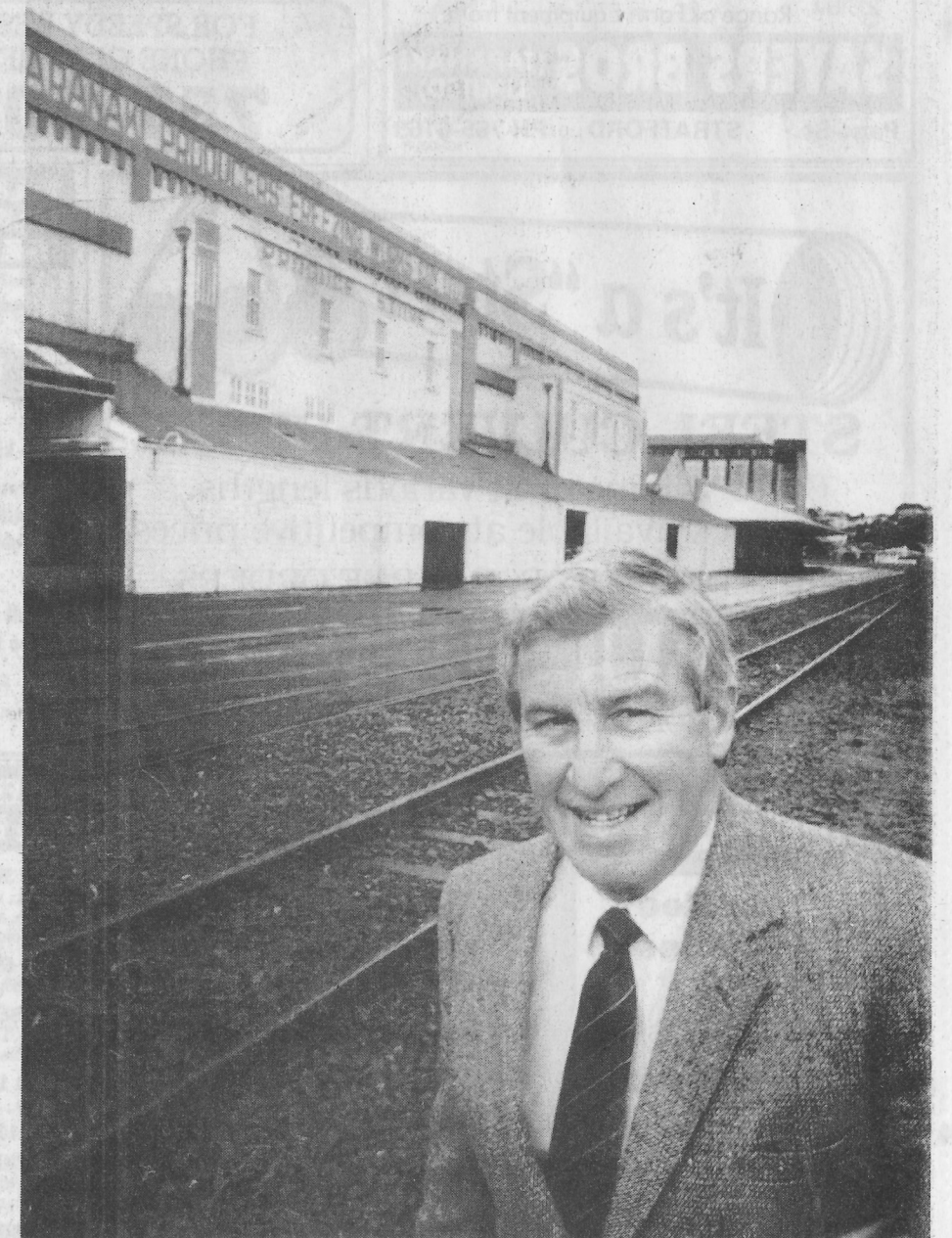
While the cool stores were designed to accommodate cheese and butter, in the latter years it has been mainly used to store butter, says Mr Leuthart.

"Its role has changed a little in the last few years. With the introduction of employment contracts, it has allowed us to get more flexibility into our operations. This ties in nicely with port reforms and reefer ships which can come in at any time of the day or night.

"The role of the cool store is still crucial to the dairy industry. A newer facility has been built by Westgate at the port, but it does not have the capacity of the cool store. We have different roles to play, but we work in well together. Our role is more that of collecting large volumes of product, and being able to put together large loads of butter and cheese."

There has been dramatic change too in the numbers of people employed at the cool stores. At peak, these ranged from 60-70 workers. Today's staff is 16, plus casual labour when required. With the advent of forklifts and pallets, today's staff can handle similar tonnages to the much larger workforces of earlier times, says Mr Leuthart.

"We talk in terms of product which comes in and moves out. While there is a capacity of 21,000 tonnes at any one time, there were 91,000 tonnes of product moved in the last year."



OUT OF A JOB: Neil Leuthart, chairman of the now defunct Taranaki Co-operative Cool Store Board. Photo: ADRIAN MALLOCH