

A big week in Taranaki history

If you're a student of history you'll agree the beginning of July 1967 was an extraordinary time in Taranaki. A read of Denis Garcia's excellent weekly summary, *50 Years Ago*, last weekend shows there were half a dozen game-changers around that time.

For a start, decimal currency – dollars and cents out of a hundred – replaced English-style pounds, shillings and pence on July 10, 1967. I can still hear the radio jingle used for the Rob Muldoon-managed campaign. It jauntily symbolised a break from our colonial roots.

Denis reports that New Zealand's first dollar transaction may well have happened in New Plymouth. A few seconds after midnight, taxi driver Mr D N Buttimore got a new dollar note in his change from the proprietor of the White Lady hamburger stall, Mr J R W Seton.

Such formal titles: I'll wager the Mr Buttimore mentioned was Derek, a man who when he wasn't driving a taxi worked in my Dad's bakery in Mangorei Rd when I was a kid.

Various news reports this week about the currency changeover captured some of the funny things that happened – like the child who thought one of the new coins was a lolly and swallowed it (an early currency movement), the prisoner who wanted to know if the loot he'd buried would still be usable when he got out of clink in a decade's time, and the woman who thought she'd need to have her chequebook reprinted.

A half century later and it seems we're edging closer to having no money at all, with financial transactions conducted by micro-chips embedded under our skin. What will the old lags do then?

Equally important, if not more so, was Denis' paragraph recording the amalgamation of the Hawera Co-operative Dairy Company with neighbouring Kiwi Co-op Dairies in South Taranaki. From once having about 125 dairy factories, Taranaki with that move was well on the way to a single dairy processing entity.

The bigger Kiwi company that emerged in 1967 ended up amalgamating with its North Taranaki counterpart, Moa-nui at Inglewood, in 1992 to form one Taranaki company, Kiwi Co-operative Dairies. That joined Waikato-based New Zealand Dairy Group and the NZ Dairy Board in 2001 to make Fonterra.

The lead item in the Garcia column recorded another seminal event – a “shock move” by the National government's Minister of Health, Mr McKay, to abolish Taranaki's four hospital boards – at New Plymouth, Stratford, Hawera and Patea - and merge them into a new entity, the Taranaki District Hospital Board, which 35 years later - in the same year Fonterra was formed - became today's district health board.

Focusing administration of public health in the province's only city would have made sense to Wellington bureaucrats, but try telling that to people living in Patea now. Latest reports record them having no local doctor to see to their needs (let alone a hospital board). Elsewhere south of Burgess Park Hill, there are deteriorating rural services as aging GPs retire and replacements become harder to find.

Talking of current events linking to the past, another of Denis' paragraphs told us the last three New Plymouth Aero Club planes based at the old Bell Block airfield (today's industrial estate on the mountain side of State Highway 3) took off for the final time and headed across the road to the new Brown Rd airfield, better known as New Plymouth Airport.

If, as that indicates, the airport terminal is 50 years old, you can hardly argue with the need for a makeover - although the extent of planned renovation is still somewhat open to question.

In another Parliamentary intervention in our affairs that fateful July, albeit a nice one, somebody with the lofty title of Postmaster-General, Mr W J Scott, announced to the House that Taranaki was to have the country's first telephone directory with a picture on the cover. It would depict – you guessed it – Mt Egmont.

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Jack Scott was a cabinet minister in the Second National Government under Keith Holyoake, and as well as being head postmaster, he chaired the NZ Historic Places Trust. He could not have known that 18 years after his announcement, the NZ Geographic Board would accept it was time to add Taranaki to the mountain's name.

One other item caught my eye: Don Harvey, who went on to become one of the province's most prominent dairy farmers, won an award in July 1967 for being the North Island's most outstanding young farmer. A prescient call.