

Cry for help from early lens-people

Nostalgia is an infection to which most of us succumb as we age.

Take photographs. How many of us view with alarm the ease with which digital images have overtaken the printed version. Alarm, because of the stack of photo albums we and our parents assembled over decades, and which murmur forlornly to us now from book shelves and drawers.

How often have you looked at your el-cheapo printer-scanner and thought I must get round to scanning mum and dad's old pictures? Yeah, me too.

A select few have a much greater dilemma. They're the professional newspaper photographers from the latter half of last century, whose era changed when digital photography took off in the late 90s, and whose spare rooms are stacked with boxes of negatives, transparencies and prints representing an important record of our recent past.

Some of them are approaching retirement, looking at downsizing homes and possessions, and wondering what to do with those precious boxes.

This is where the column gets a bit close to home, but stay with me. One of those contemplating the ultimate cleanout recently was Rob Tucker, who surmised nobody was interested in what he'd photographed between the start of his career as a press photographer at the *Taranaki Herald* in 1966 and the 1990s, when he shelled out gazillions for one of the first digital cameras.

Rob is one of a school of photographers who learned their craft in Taranaki. Sometimes referred to as "Alf's boys", most were mentored by Alf Brandon, chief photographer at the Taranaki Daily News during that time. They include nationally prominent press lensmen like Bruce Jarvis, Neville Marriner and Ross Land. Rob's colleagues at the Herald included Ray Pigney, Kirby Wright and Jean Andrews.

I recall as a teenager seeing Alf for the first time in the early 1960s. He was covering the New Plymouth Girls High School annual athletics day on the hockey ground over the street from the school in Mangorei Rd. He was perched on high ground beside my father's old bakery building, as was I. But we were watching different things. Alf seemed bewitched by a couple of fantails flitting in a tree. He photographed them endlessly.

I realised later he had a different eye from the rest of us, a view of the world shared by all his contemporaries, by every photographer I would later observe in newspapering.

It was never better shown than in a prize-winning photograph taken by Auckland Star chief photographer Fred Freeman when I was picture editor there. He'd noticed a group of demolition workers in black singlets, shorts and work boots having smoko on a shop verandah roof in Queen St: below them on the half-wrecked building was a surviving sign saying "leaders in menswear fashion".

Alf, Fred, Rob, Jean and all of them noticed things others failed to see. They took pictures of them, and so documented our world. They still do.

It's many of those images of life in Taranaki in the 20th century that are now at risk, as they are all around New Zealand, because their makers are getting edgy about oncoming old age and the need for more affordable - smaller - living quarters.

However, a solution may be at hand. Alarmed at my brother's lament (his collection includes photographs from his time as Michael Fay's lensman during the latter's quests for the America's Cup) I posted something on Facebook recently. It drew similar accounts from other photographers, some of whom had already ditched their caches.

JT column – saving the past

But it also alerted a colleague, former NZ Herald editor Gavin Ellis, now a media commentator, who took our concerns to the Auckland City Library. It has agreed to set up a repository for photographers, and journalists, as well, since we face a similar problem.

Rob has concluded a deal with the library, who will take his stuff as the basis of a new resource, to be catalogued, and, as people seek images for various purposes, digitised and placed online.

Ellis hopes this approach can be spread to other regions, with people like those named above donating their early local work to local libraries.

Our own Puke Ariki already has a photographic project based on the Swainson/Woods Collection. However, while Puke-Ariki has the space, it doesn't have the staff to cope with anything more at this stage, says manager Kelvin Day.

Which begs the question: is there some way we can help them preserve such important visual records for all time?