

The woman who changed history

There was pride in my grandmother's voice when she announced she could die happy because she'd lived long enough to see horses and gigs become fast motor cars. It was the sheer progress of it that enthralled her.

After watching *The Post* at our local cinema – and doing something naff, applauding at the end, then rushing out in embarrassment before the lights came up – I saw what she was on about. I've witnessed just as big a change.

The movie tells how the *Washington Post* overcame pressure from the US government and its own shareholders to publish the Pentagon Papers, revealing how lying presidents sustained the Vietnam war. I was struck by the background details. Here were the same hot-lead pots, linotype machines, stones, page forms, Lamson tubes and giant press that I first saw at the *Taranaki Herald* in 1965. Just bigger. Microsoft Word has reminded me how much things have moved on by putting a red line under "linotype". No such word any more, apparently.

Those of us who began in what was once the most powerful non-governmental institution in the world, the Fourth Estate, have seen the horse and gig take on ephemeral form. There are still presses, but every preceding process has morphed into a digital miracle within which the words and photographs are no longer physically apparent.

One thing remains intact. It's the beginning of the news business where journalists try to persuade those in possession of information to part with it. The mechanics of that may have altered, but the transaction remains the same - faster, technology-aided, spin-hampered as always, but not much different from when cave-dwellers relied on one of their number to go into the back of the cave to find what was causing the bad smell.

I must have been a nuisance to sit beside in the movie theatre, because other memories were triggered, as well. There was Meryl Streep playing one of the great women of the 20th century, Katherine Meyer "Kay" Graham, who inherited hands-on directorship of the paper after her husband committed suicide. At first, she accepted as quite natural the process whereby he, the man in the family, was given control of the paper by the owner, her father.

Streep portrayed Graham as diffident, but also someone who realised her editor, Ben Bradlee, was right to pursue a cause that threatened to put them all in jail for contempt of court. They would be defying the Nixon regime's injunction preventing the *New York Times* (first publisher of some of the stolen papers) from continuing its revelations. The blokes all said no, Bradlee said yes, Graham finally said 'let's do this' (sort of).

Graham and Bradlee and their reporters went from those events in 1971 to pursue Nixon and his gang over the Watergate break-in, which is shown in the film's final scenes. Nixon – seen as a shadowy figure through a window of the White House – was brought down.

The reason I clapped was the renewed memory that I worked through the same era, was once inspired by those and other names, like *New York Times* columnist Scotty Reston and the *Post*'s Ben Bagdikian, the reporter who tracked down Pentagon Papers leaker, Daniel Ellsberg, after he went into hiding with them. Bagdikian later wrote numerous books on the decline of newspapers and the global agglomeration of ownership.

We might have been observing all that from a great distance here in New Zealand, but it engendered pride in our business. World-wide, there was a surge in enrolments at journalism schools, especially by young women stirred by Graham's courage.

There was an odd sequel for me. When in 1986 I was sent on a tour of America's best newspapers, I asked the organisers, the US Information Service (such a misnomer) to include the *Post* in my itinerary. When I got to Washington, however, I found myself at a minor, foreign-owned rival daily. Even after a decade, the US government had not forgiven one the world's great newspapers.

Footnote 1: In response to Dennis Stewart's wonderful "confession" to hitting a golf ball through a window of the Tucker household in the early 1960s - yes Dennis, I remember it vividly. You did well to survive Jack's wrath.

Footnote 2: In a previous column, I unintentionally intimated journalist John Macdonald discovered the cause of the Erebus disaster. I meant to convey he was the first to report it.