

Career launched by dark stairway

I knew it was coming, had known for ages, but it was still a shock when I saw it happening.

There were pink-red cones and pedestrian stoppers up the footpath and a truck backed halfway into a hole in the wall. There in the middle of a roofless footie field-sized pile of rubble was a bloody great digger ripping the guts out of my spiritual home.

Not home exactly, but the place I started out 53 years ago in this mad business of writing and reporting – the Taranaki Newspapers Ltd building on the corner of Currie and Powderham Sts in New Plymouth, a place recently dubbed “our Fleet St” by one of its last inhabitants.

The important thing is this newspaper is still here, still appearing six days a week, still serving the community as an important source of news, celebration, commiseration, gossip, information, promotion and self-reflection. It’s moved, is all. And in these days of digital connection a newspaper office can be pretty much anywhere.

With a bit of luck, part-demolition of the Currie St building hasn’t reached the one thing I hope survives renovation – the grand staircase leading upstairs to what was once the Taranaki Herald editorial office. Overseen by a stained-glass window and possessing massive wooden bannisters, it held many memories for those of us who worked there, the hundreds of us.

Here’s one of mine from my first week as an 18-year-old cadet reporter in August 1965. I was sent one night to cover the Taranaki Caving Club’s annual meeting, and when members talked about rare moa bones they’d found in a cave at Mahoenui, even someone as green as me figured notes should be taken.

I returned to the office about 11pm and had to fumble my way up that staircase in the dark because I couldn’t find the light switch. I felt uneasy about being alone in a building that housed the spirits of many unusual characters who’d preceded me...until I realised I wasn’t alone after all.

Something sounding like a party was going on in the main reporters’ room. Were people drunk? Surely not. Well, it turned out they were. A bunch of my seniors was making a boozy racket, while from down the hallway came the sounds of someone retching. There was cheering, and loud exclaiming, and all the noise you associate with a rowdy get-together.

Was I about to learn something unexpected about my new career? Yes and no. Even though I’d been at work only a few days, I’d concluded that the pressures of daily journalism needed the release of alcohol after work was done. Heavy drinking was de rigeur. But in the office? Late at night?

Not exactly. It turned out the senior reporters from both papers had attended the opening of an engineering firm’s new premises at Bell Block, an event important enough to attract the Prime Minister. Free drink flowed copiously, much of it down the gullets of those there to report on proceedings.

The drunken group in our office included a reporter from the opposition, the Daily News, who was incapable of writing his story for the next morning’s edition. He was being assisted by several people from the Herald, which made a mockery of things I’d been told about bitter rivalry between papers. That was seemingly trumped by the requirement to help a mate. One of our guys wasn’t much use – he was in the loo, arms wrapped round the toilet pan.

One man was sober, Daily News racing editor John Waters. He studied the look on my face, then said: “Welcome to journalism, lad.” I attempted a shrug and went down to the other reporters room to try to make sense of my notes. I wrote a story as best I knew how and went home about midnight.

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Next day, there was a bit of excitement in the office. I was told to report to pan man for help to massage my story. Showing little sign of the night before, he quickly rewrote it and told me to rush the top copy to the subeditors and the carbon copy to the Press Association man, who telegraphed it to PA's Wellington office.

Many newspapers around the world ran my third-hand account about what turned out to be a significant scientific discovery. Journalism, eh - I was hooked. It cost me a few rounds in the pub later, but that only seemed natural.