

Rex's memories of imps and valiants



Rex Phillips was a hail-fellow-well-met New Plymouth businessman who never accepted the mindset of long retirement, keeping his fast brain fully engaged until he passed on recently aged 87.

He was a pleasure to spend time with because he recalled key moments in his life with mind pictures of vivid detail, which was a boon when we produced a book on his and wife Jane's lives.

It's a compelling story, a history of the rapid development of the province's motor vehicle industry, from the late 1920s days of his father, Bill Phillips, to the time Rex left the business in 1993 after 40 years.

By then, W R Phillips Ltd accounted for nearly a third of Taranaki's car sales.

It was a hard slog getting to that status, a journey that began when Bill (known to everyone as "WR") arrived in New Plymouth in 1928 to sell motor vehicles for the Whanganui company that first employed him, Adams Ltd.

Bill was the son of Peter Phillips, who migrated alone from the Portuguese island of Madeira at the age of 11 to work in New Zealand's kauri forests. Bill married Lily Shepherd, who was born in a Gloucestershire pub with the evocative name The Golden Cross Inn of Black Jack St.



He was 16 when he got his first job as a mechanic at Adams. By 21, he'd saved enough to go to the US to work for Studebaker, where he kept up night school training on all aspects of the car business.

He returned after two years, the experience guiding him decades later to send his own sons, Rex and younger brother Neil, on a year-long study of the trade in Britain and the US in 1956-57.

The trip ended with the brothers driving a new Plymouth Belvedere from Detroit to a dealer in Sacramento, California. They had seven days to do it and arrived on deadline, having taken turns to drive between 7am and 9pm, gaining enough time to see the Grand Canyon, Hoover Dam, Las Vegas and the Painted Desert.

Rex was keen on getting an accountancy degree when he left New Plymouth Boys High School in 1951, but Bill needed him in his rapidly expanding business.

Bill started the company in 1946, having left Adams to manage the New Plymouth branch of Dominion Motors, which he tried unsuccessfully to buy.

He eventually approached Todd Motors – which had a car assembly line at Petone – and they appointed him their New Plymouth franchise-holder for Hillman, Talbot and Sunbeam cars, Comma and Karrier trucks and David Brown and Minneapolis-Moline tractors.

Rex began as office junior in December 1951. He was soon selling cars from Bill's increasing range of marques, that would eventually include Humber Super Snipes and Hawks, Chryslers, Dodges, De Sotos, Plymouths, Valiants, Mitsubishis and others.

He recalled one of his first sales, which involved a trip to Stratford on a cold, wet night that netted the company just £5: "WR was highly amused."

He came back from the '57 trip full of slick American ideas on how to wrap up sales, but ran into resistance from WR's Taranaki customers, who said they were used to sealing their deals on merely a handshake.

Rex adapted his approach and became highly successful. For instance, he arrived home late for one Christmas dinner after going to Masterton to bring back a Hillman Super Minx - his 100th sale of that model in a single year.

He was a popular boss, a former staff member recalls. Rex put that down to spending time talking to the company's people. "First thing on Monday mornings I moved amongst the staff inquiring about their weekends.

"I showed an interest in their families, not just them as people who worked there from 8 to 5. I asked if everyone was all right... 'how's your baby', 'are you getting over the measles' sort of thing. People appreciate that."

Asked about his favourite car during his decades of selling them, Rex named the Chrysler Valiant. The worst? Without doubt the Hillman Imp.

By the time he retired from the firm and sold out his interest to Neil and his family in 1993, W R Phillips had more than 90 staff and operated from newly rebuilt premises at the original location in Devon St West.

Rex occupied the years since then doing public work for many different organisations, gaining recognition in 2012 when he received a New Plymouth Citizens' Award from then-mayor Harry Duynhoven.