

ŌPŌTIKI NEWS

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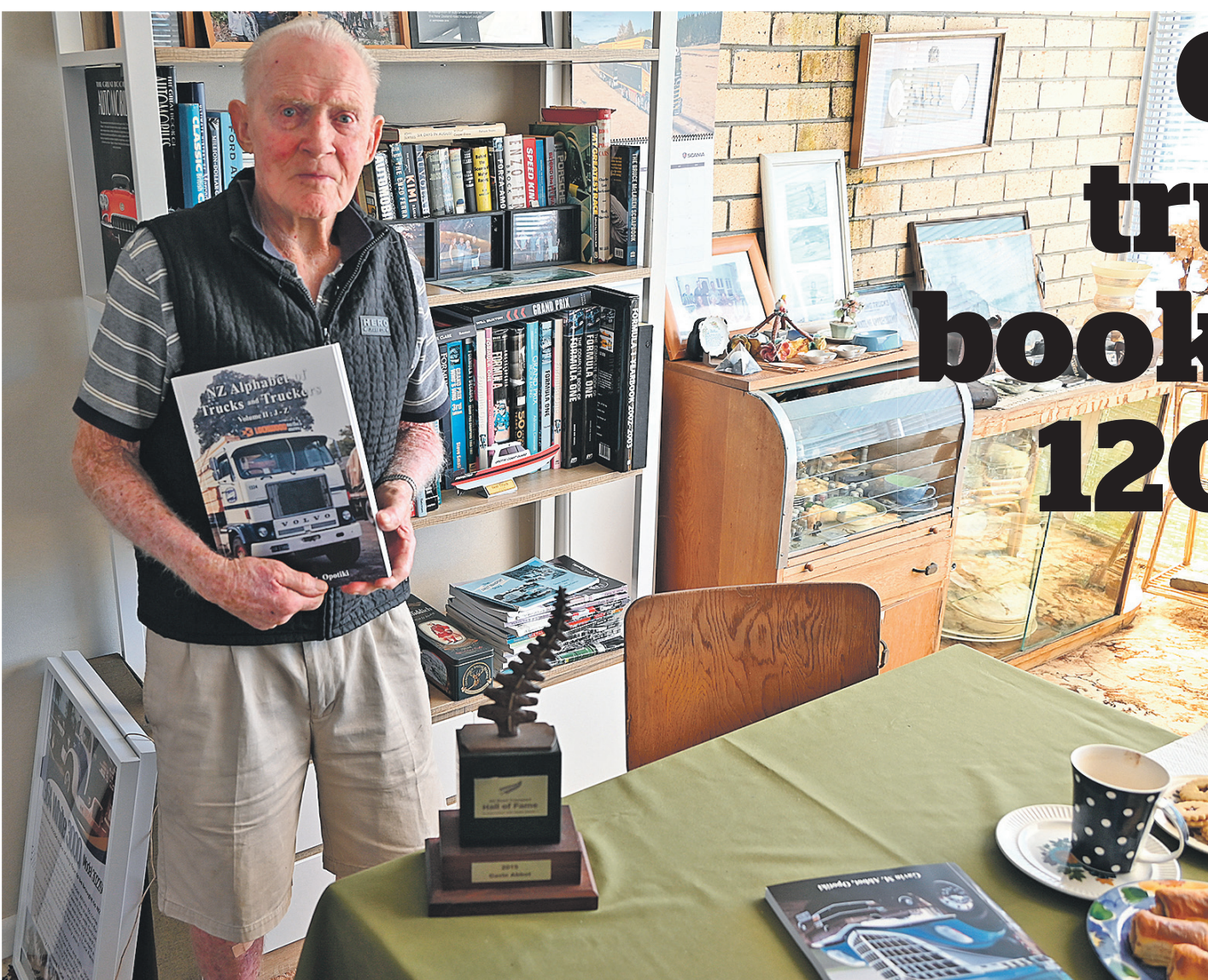
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Gavin's trucking book spans 120 years

Paul Charman

TRUCKING identity and historian Gavin Abbot's latest book – *NZ Alphabet of Trucks and Tractors* – hit the streets at the weekend.

It is Volume II, covering J to Z, of the 160 truck makes that have been imported into New Zealand over the years.

The Ōpōtiki resident includes plenty

TRUCKING GURU: Ōpōtiki's Gavin Abbot is thought to be one of the most successful self-published authors in the country.

Photo Paul Charman



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120 years of trucking

■ From P1

of eye candy for trucking enthusiasts in his latest book. All photos have been taken within New Zealand, depicting transport operators from the 1920s through to the present.

More popular makes such as International, Mack and Nissan have many pages devoted to them, while more obscure makes such as Karrier, Leader and Willys will have just one or two.

Popular makes from England, the United States and Europe dominated the pre-World War II parade of brands with makes from Japan emerging from about the 1960s onward. China is the new force in truck manufacture, with brands from that country also included.

Mr Abbot, 95, has lived in Ōpōtiki all his life, being the son of a race-horse trainer from a family which never owned a car. In 1945, he left school aged 15 to become an apprentice motor mechanic.

"I always loved trucks, worked part time at (carriers) Ron Smith Ltd and rode along with drivers on weekends every chance I got," he said.

Determined to get noticed, he would sometimes finish his day job and work till late at night with his friends, loading coal onto truck trays by torch light.

"I finished at the garage on a Wednesday, having gained my trade certificate after five years, and started the next day as a driver at Ron Smith's.

"I stayed there 35 years, growing with the business and eventually bought shares in it.

"Transport wise, Ōpōtiki was a sort of halfway house between Rotorua and Gisborne, which took six hours to drive to. We ended up as a big operation with 25 trucks here.

"As a driver, it was nothing to work 12-18 hours. For example, starting 6am I'd drive my six hours to Gisborne and have a beer at the Waerengaahika Hotel. Lunch would be three courses served on starched white tablecloths with silver cutlery.

"Then I'd go to the markets and load up with fruit and vegetables as a back load. They couldn't load my truck till 4pm, or after the trains had been loaded, so I might not arrive back at Ōpōtiki till 1am. Another driver would be waiting to take my load to Whakatāne, Edgecumbe and Kawerau.

"We sold out and I retired in 1985." Mr Abbot spent his retirement restoring about 30 old trucks and adding to his vast library of books on trucking and truck brochures, which he began collecting as a boy.

"Restoring the trucks involved comb-

'A truly remarkable man'

MANN Print general manager David Goile praised Gavin Abbot as, "a truly remarkable man".

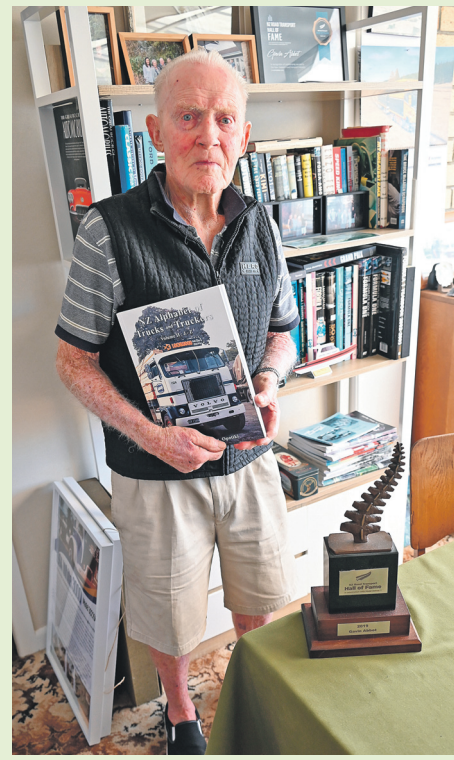
"Gavin has given our company a constant stream of orders spanning the last nine years," Mr Goile said.

"He never ceases to amaze us with his ability to research and recall so much trucking history. Whether these last A-Z volumes will be your final books, only time will tell, but if they are you can be hugely proud of what you have achieved to date."

With 9645 books spanning 13 volumes and a total of 1896 printed pages of information and photographs, the author's work had consumed a total of 771,600 sheets of paper.

This paper had all been sourced from pulp made from sustainable forestry.

"We have printed books for many people over the years, but none compare to what we have printed for you Gavin, and there seems to be no end of demand by trucking enthusiasts for your books," Mr Goile said.



I always loved trucks, worked part time at Ron Smith Ltd and rode along with drivers on weekends every chance I got.

– Gavin Abbot

ing the whole country for parts. It was a voyage of discovery, and I met fascinating people along the way. So many had a similar passion for trucks and those conversations formed many friendships. The trouble is now I'm losing many of the friends made on my travels."

He began co-operating with Taumarunui historian Ron Cooke, who wrote several books on trucking in the King Country.

"Ron would send me photos of old trucks and ask me what they were. While driving away from attending one of his book launches, I thought, 'I've got enough stuff to do a book of my own'."

The latest book will be his 13th.

"I suppose I've sold about 10,000 books over the years.

"The secret to producing them is having a top-level printer in Whakatāne, Mann Print (see footnote).

"I don't have to deal with China; Mann Print types out my handwritten copy and follows my layout instructions. They store all the content electronically and I can have any of the books reprinted when they run out. It's great to have a publisher of this calibre locally."

His vast collection of trucking literature fills three rooms at his Elliott Street home, having recently been promised to a transport museum now being built at Mercer.

"Most of my books have been on trucking history covering various regions, but a lot of people would say, 'what's a Diamond T; what's a Rio?'"

"These are the trucks that my generation grew up with, but they're all gone now. So that made me think, I'd better list all the makes which came to New Zealand. I have a list of about 160 makes put to work here by transport operators. But I only managed to get photos and captions for just over 100."

Much of the content has come from

photos he has been taking since he was a boy.

"I was always interested in the old stuff, and I've been knocking on doors and getting photos from families of the transport operators past and present."

Mr Abbot made friends with the Richardson family who run the Bill Richardson Transport Museum in Invercargill. In 2019, the family nominated him for a NZ Road Transport Hall of Fame Award, which remains proudly on display in his home."

What contribution have trucks made to the development of New Zealand?

"Oh everything – they made the country. There's hardly an item in your home which didn't come to you by truck. My latest two volumes show the trucks and people who have operated them over the last 120 years and the progress that has been made in all aspects of build, operating and conveying goods. The basic shape has stayed the same, but that's about all.

"Advancement in wheels, tyres, engines, transmissions, suspension, cabs and trailers can be seen following each make's new models. The evolution of paintwork to today's works of art is impressive.

"There's such a leap from those early stock crates to today's smooth works of art, containers, loggers and tankers and goodbye to tarps – to arrive at curtain-siders with all their Christmas tree lighting."

Does he think electric trucks will take over.

"I'm not much interested, mainly because I won't be here to see them take over. Half the trucking magazines are now devoted to electric trucks but in my view, they are problematic and the country's capacity to generate enough power for a national fleet would be well beyond us at present. Carrying heavy loads will always require petrol and especially diesel in my view.

"But it's interesting Waitoa Dairy Factory had six electric trucks in 1924, but the petrol trucks were just coming in and they found the electric ones were running out of power, without the capacity to get to a farm and back. So, they faded out but last year – 100 years later – the Waitoa factory got its first modern electric truck. No word yet on how successful it's been."



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