



Information Item	From the factory floor to the forefront of the crane industry
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### From the factory floor to the forefront of the crane industry

Following 47 years working the crane industry's every angle, Bill Houlker has swapped construction sites for the countryside as he sets up shop with his daughter, son-in-law and two granddaughters just north of Plimmerton.

"We're going to get some animals, so I'm working out how we'll manage those, plus cooking the odd meal and sometimes picking my granddaughters up from school."

His new, more genteel life gives Bill plenty of time for his family, which is a welcome trade-in having spent his entire life in a career he was smitten with.

"Sometimes I felt a bit smug because I was getting paid to have fun."

In the early 70s, Bill was a senior accounts clerk at a printing factory, but that changed when his father, who owned a company which sold trucks, tower cranes and other cutting-edge machines of the time, called on him to take the family business to the next level.

"My father thought tower cranes would be key to future infrastructure, so he spoke to Hans Liebherr Senior who offered to send me off to Europe to learn all about them.

"It sounded like an adventure, so of course I went. I wound up in Killarney in Southern Ireland, living in the Liebherr factory where, over several years, I got to experience every stage of the crane building and operating process."

While in Europe, Bill's time was spread across the production process, from planning and assembly, to finishing and erection.

He even spent some time in the finance department, because "you had to know how to sell, how to communicate."

Living on site meant that Bill got to meet all the clients: "They'd include me in meetings, so I got used to dealing with high-profile customers."

Bill returned to New Zealand in the mid-70s, but home wasn't quite the same as the bustle of the Liebherr factory. In fact, it was the opposite: the tower crane industry was slowly dying.

"I continued to work for my father's company as a general salesperson, selling trucks, excavators and motors until 1979, when the company was sold to the New Zealand Motor Corporation, which they merged with their existing company, Domtrac.

"I thought I was going to get the boot but instead, at 27 years old, I was made the manager of the Wellington branch, where I was in charge of 32 mechanics with a decent pass rate."

By the early 80s, the crane industry in New Zealand was returning with a vengeance, so once again Bill's focus shifted when Domtrac made him Specialist Account Manager for Cranes and Heavy Lifting Equipment.

"Around the same time, I was approached by Morrow, who were interested in setting up a fleet of tower cranes.

"Out of nowhere they dropped the whole thing on me and told me they were looking at taking the whole franchise off Domtrac and asked if I'd be interested in coming along!"

Despite the generous offer, Bill's loyalty was with Domtrac – they had acquired his father's business after all – so he reported back to Domtrac, who were horrified by the idea.

"I suggested I should get on my bicycle to talk directly with Liebherr about protecting the franchise, but the response from the hierarchy at the time was that they'd send the guy who dealt with bulldozers instead, because I was a mere account manager."

That was all Bill needed to hear.

On 1 January 1982, he joined Morrow, formed Morrow New Zealand, and set about trying to sell some tower cranes.

"Morrow were keen to set up rental, but New Zealand wasn't a rental market then. Nevertheless, we started preparing, learning how to build locally with better quality control."

One year later, in 1983, the New Zealand tower crane market was back thriving, and Bill was right there alongside it. "I was selling about 15 cranes a year, which was quite the achievement!"

Despite his success, Bill will be the first to admit that he never really had a plan for his career – he just took the opportunities as they came and moved up by acquiring knowledge and knowing people and the industry.

That's also why he was never too taken aback when the crane industry took a hit, which it did numerous times throughout his 47-year career.

"On 22 October 1987, the famous crash came, and we didn't sell another tower crane after that for five years.

"Thankfully, like everyone, I saw it coming, so I'd already asked Hans Liebherr Senior if we could do something with their mobile harbour cranes, which I admired.

"He gave me the thumbs up, which led to me selling two port of entry cranes, and that market's been strong ever since."

Bill recalls how, since the late 80s, the time has just flown by.

Over the years he has juggled his family and work, and always managed to enjoy the perks of the job like the travel opportunities, including attending Con Expo in the US and brief weekends spent in Singapore en route to Europe.

“The Bauma Machinery Fair in Germany was always a favourite of mine. You wouldn't think you could fit that many people in the city! And the size of the machines on show is always spectacular.”

Nevertheless, despite the travel and his impressive track record for selling, most of Bill's career highlights come from being on site or seeing the result of his efforts.

“You can't beat going into a city and seeing cranes everywhere and knowing that you sold, or even built them. One of my all-time favourite projects is the Sky Tower in Auckland, which really was a problem-solvers dream.”

Even though Bill has started his retirement – which finally came in March, just before lockdown, after two years of planning and training his replacement – his enthusiasm for the crane industry isn't letting up any time soon.

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