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**Autor:** Staheli, Ernst Peter  
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## From Here to There

by Ernst Peter Staheli

I was born in Dussnang, TG – Switzerland on the 30th May 1935. I went to primary and secondary school and as my older brother was 6 years older, I enjoyed very much playing with our neighbours kids and exploring a little stream on the edge of the pine forest only 100 metres away from our house.

At age 16 I began my apprenticeship as a mechanical engineer at Sulzer Brothers in Winterthur, where I passed my exams with flying colours. On the last day of the exams, after lunch, the three examiners came up to me and I got a hell of a fright as I thought I had done something wrong. To my elation they told me I had done everything well and I could go home. After 2 or 3 months I left Sulzer Brothers and went to Stockholm, Sweden to work for De Laval. I didn't like the menial and boring work I had to do there and after a while I got a much better job in an instrument firm where I worked for almost a year. During that time, I got to know another two Swiss men and together we bought a little open boat with an Archimedes 5HP outboard and we had a fantastic time cruising around all the small Islands (Sharegarden) outside Stockholm. We spent many summer weekends camping and fishing on these islands and sometimes, when we woke up in the morning our tent on the outside was covered with thousands of mosquitoes.

I kept in contact with my brother Joe in Weinfelden and when he told me he was thinking of immigrating to NZ, and without hesitation, I said to him I would join him and his family. On returning to Switzerland, knowing that cars in New Zealand were expensive, with the money I had saved in Sweden and some help from my father, I bought a used 2.5 litre Riley car.

In the middle of October 1957 (aged 22) I drove that car to Rotterdam on my own, as my brother and his family didn't want to come with me as it involved an overnight stay in Germany and the car had to be there early for loading onto our ship the Sibajak. Joe and family (wife Helen, son Herbert and daughter Anita) arrived by train in Rotterdam and we boarded the Sibajak which in today's terms was an old tub on its last legs.

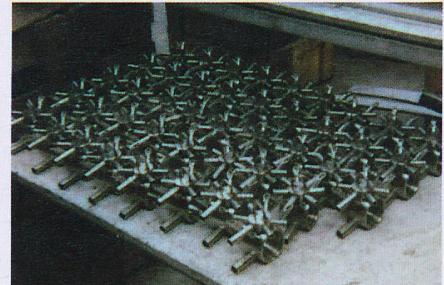
Everything went well and we cruised through the Panama Canal to Tahiti and arrived in Wellington on the 1st December 1957. There we had to stay for 2 or 3 days before the car became available.

We drove from Wellington to Waharoa (500km over 2 days) to a Swiss farmer, Fritz Scheidegger, who had a cottage for us to stay in. As my brother already knew the Oettlis from Weinfelden, who were farming outside Hamilton, we thought Hamilton would be a good place to get work, so Joe decided to buy a house in Hamilton East. As I was the only one who could communicate in English, and my presence was always required for anything reasonably important, like buying a house, I got a job with a Hamilton Engineering firm and after a few months changed to a small firm that only had two employees. The elderly business owner, after only a short time working there, virtually left me to run the workshop. From there I got to know the engineering foreman at Waikato Bitumen – the biggest customer of my employer.



In January 1958, I went to Mercer with my brother Joe and family to the Swiss Picnic. There I met my dear Christeli for the first time as if it had been guided from above. We got married in March 1960 and not long after I started my own business where Christine was doing the office work for quite some time until a fulltime person was required.

I could see the huge potential out there for a repair and maintenance business and started to buy small machines and a new lathe for which I had to borrow 90% from a finance company at 15% interest. So, on the 1st August 1960 I started Micro Precision Engineers Ltd in a small shed behind an old house in 20 Devon Road, Hamilton. I was in touch with customers from my previous employer



and within a short time word must have spread to other firms that I was doing good engineering work for a reasonable price. After about 2 years I was approached by a milking machine firm asking if I could manufacture stainless steel teat cups that, up until now, had to be imported from Sweden and were expensive. Of course, I could not say no, but also, as I had no money to buy an essential hydraulic press, I decided to build one. To power the press I used a hydraulic pump from a WW2 Lancaster Bomber. I also had to make the forming dies to form the cups which had to be made from special hardened tool steel.

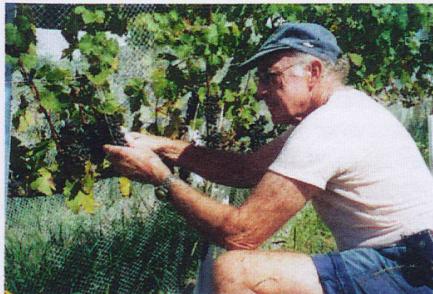
We made teat cups for almost every milking machine company in NZ. As the workforce steadily increased our product range also increased and we started producing cluster claws, tube hangers that only required one bolt and tangential nipples for better milk flow. From there we started manufacturing butterfly and ball valves and soon I was asked by Australian firms if I could manufacture all these items for them, which of course I gladly took on. Every item that I developed and manufactured was copied by other Companies which was never of great concern as we always manufactured to capacity.

My masterpiece would have been the micromatic actuator which later on was even copied by a Japanese firm. This was a device that one could open and close valves by remote control. Best of all, I designed and developed the gland unit for Rotary Milking Platforms that transformed vacuum-power and milk from a stationary into rotary motion.



Except for improvements for electronic data transfers the rotary gland unit is basically still the same as I have seen on my Granddaughters goat farm today.

In the first 8 years of our marriage we had three children – Nicola, Roderick and Alex. The older two got involved in our business at an early stage and carried on under my guidance. Around about 2010, they sold out to an overseas company. By that time, I was already focusing on a hobby vineyard on Waiheke Island that we sold later on. We still have some of the 2004 vintage in our cellar.



Apart from managing a manufacturing engineering business, I also built three sailing yachts starting in the late 1960s with a 48ft steel yacht, the Christabelle, which was a steel ketch that we sailed to Fiji-Vanuatu-Espiritu Santo and from there to Cairns and down the Barrier Reef back to NZ.

About 1977 I asked a Matamata firm to build the hull for a 48ft aluminium yacht, the Flamingo, which I fitted out myself and sailed to Brisbane and up the Coast to Townsville and back to NZ. My biggest yacht project I started in 1986-87 – the 51ft Silver Bullet which was built in foam-fibreglass including Kevlar and carbon fibre. I also had a considerable design input and in 1991 we won the Auckland Anniversary Regatta. May I mention there would not be many people in New Zealand that would have built and raced their own boat against already then pretty stiff competition. As we sailed for years around Waiheke Island, in 1990 we bought some land there with three other partners and we established Gulf Crest



Vineyard which we sold in 1996 and is now called Obsidian Vineyard. We are still very much Waiheke residents and have planted our property with many native trees including Kauri and Rimu. Christine and I still enjoy looking after our bush garden paradise overlooking Hurui Bay and we hope to do so for as long as we can.

After we got married in 1960 we were living on Christine's parents farm for a year as they went back to Switzerland for an extended working holiday. They still had a house in the centre of Weinfelden where we spent many memorable days on our trips to Switzerland. After Christine's parents return we purchased our first house in Roy Street, Nawton in Hamilton. From there we steadily worked our way up the property ladder with the last place on the Hamilton Lake where we intend to stay for as long as we can.

May I mention that two of the houses we built on bare land – the first one in Carlson Crescent and the other one in Pembroke Street. We employed an Austrian builder named Kurt for many years and he would have been the most meticulous, reliable and honest tradesperson I have ever come across. By coincidence at a neighbour's meeting not that long ago I got talking to a builder who was renovating Carlson Crescent and he said he was most impressed with the building quality.



Of course, for all this business and leisure activity you need good cars that had to be updated as technology advanced. A friend of mine many years ago jokingly used to say it's time to change your car because the ashtray was full. I was never a real smoker and I gave it away around 35 years of age. That amongst other reasons may contribute to my good health including cycling for quite a few kilometres a day.

*The Hamilton Swiss Club wish to congratulate Christine on her recent 80th Birthday and wish Ernie and Christine all the best for their forthcoming 60th Wedding Anniversary. What a great achievement!*



Christabelle



Christabelle in progress



Flamingo



Silver Bullet



Auckland Anniversary Day Regatta 1991  
Skipper – Ernst Staheli