

Dispatcher puts in long day

"THE driver is the most important cog in the industry — he's our best salesman," says Russell Wilkin. "Once he's away from the depot, he's on his own."

For the last seven years Russell has been a dispatcher in the rural cartage section of Transport Wairarapa. For fifteen years before that he was himself a truck driver. He knows rural Wairarapa like the back of his hand — the roads, the farms — where they are and what their loading facilities are like.

To-day he and Len Pepperell share week about in being dispatcher — in taking orders for rural transport work and allocating jobs to the drivers of the 21 trucks under their control.

Born in Masterton, the son of a truck driver, Russell spent all his early life in Mauriceville where his parents still live.

He spent five years apprenticed to a panel-beater in Carterton after leaving school at 15, and then took a driving job with the trucking company of I.E. Allen & Son, whose depot was near the Waingawa bridge just south of Masterton. Originally this was only meant to be a "fill in" job for a few weeks, but he stayed ten years doing rural cartage work mainly livestock.

This was followed by three years driving for Keith Shackleton, the local carrier back in Mauriceville. When the business was

sold, Russell went back to I. E. Allen & Son at Waingawa — now owned by Transport Wairarapa. That was nearly ten years ago.

After doing a mail run for a while, he went back to general rural cartage work, carrying livestock, river metal, lime, fertiliser, hay etc. Then, seven years ago, a rare vacancy came up in the dispatch office; he applied and became one of Transport Wairarapa's dispatchers.

He thought this was a way of trying to overcome one of the social problems many truck drivers face — that of not seeing much of

their wives and families in the busy periods of the year.

Now, while his working hours are just as long — if not longer — at least he's at home in the evenings — even if he is on the phone much of the time.

Every Friday afternoon, he and Len Pepperell swap jobs. When it's Russell's duty week, he has to deal with all orders for rural cartage most of which are phoned through. For the next seven nights, the company phone and radio network is switched through to Russell's home — including week-ends.

Indeed the week-end is probably the busiest time — stock for the local butchers are carted on Sunday and there's always the task

of filling the pens at the Waingawa freezing works ready for Monday's kill. Saturday is spent taking orders, scheduling loads most suited to individual trucks and trailers and calling the drivers that will be needed.

Sunday morning at 7.30 finds Russell back at the depot dispatching the drivers on their various journeys — in the school holidays his eldest son often accompanies him and gives him a hand.

Sunday evening, like all duty week-nights, is spent by the phone accepting more orders, organising trucks and calling drivers who will be required to make an early start — in the busy season, this can mean all of them.

These evening calls account for around 70 per cent of the work for the following day and usually don't cease till after 10 pm. The phone starts ringing while Russell's enroute from office to home on week-nights and his wife Marie holds the fort for that period.

She also helps by writing out dockets when he's flat out. Luckily she has a rural background, knows the drivers and is very understanding — there's no time for social life that week!



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Monday is taken up with organising entries for the Wednesday Masterton stock sale — they have to be in by late afternoon. The evening is spent contacting farmers to check stock tallies and informing them of pick-up times for the day itself.

If it's a lamb, ewe or cattle fair, co-operation with other branches of the company at Dannevirke, Feilding and Eketahuna is necessary, as well as liaison with out-depots at Tinui, Pirinoa and Mauriceville; and it may be necessary to farm some work out to other companies.

These days there's the added complication that cattle and adult sheep going to the freezing works must be in the works' yards by noon the day before slaughter. The carting of stud stock is another matter again — some are carried long distances and for those going to the South Island there has to be a close link with companies based down there so that stock can be back loaded

on trucks making the costly journey north on the Cook Strait ferries worthwhile.

With transport costs ever increasing, one of the most important aspects of the dispatcher's job is ensuring that the fullest use is made of available plant and that work is completed as economically as possible. This is where farmers, stock agents, aerial top-dressing companies and others can help the most — by giving as much advance warning as they can of work coming up, giving more time for better planning, and keeping charges down.

On the whole transport users are pretty good in this respect — but there's always room for improvement. "We're in a demand industry," says Russell, "it will never be simple."

So the week goes on, until Friday comes round again and Russell gets, what he calls, "a week off". During that week he's in the office checking drivers time-sheets and invoicing the work of the day before. In the "off" season it's important to share out the

work as fairly as possible as far as variety goes and, even more important, the hours worked.

On Tuesday he goes to the Pahiatua sale to organise the clearing of stock going south to the Wairarapa. On Wednesdays it's a similar task at the Masterton sale — and when there's a sale at Martinborough, that's where he is on Thursdays.

Between times he will visit farms to check metalling contracts or the gradient of roads up to airstrips; advise on loading facilities at stockyards; re-familiarise himself with the roads as he travels over them noting new facilities and, probably most importantly, meeting the farmers that he so often talks to over the phone.

Now and again, when the chance arises, he goes out to see how a job is going and maybe gives the driver a hand. He also tries to keep a check on the change of ownership of properties with an eye to retaining their business.

While life can be very hectic at times and can almost drive him to distraction — unless he tells himself "not to panic, but to stop and think" — there are the slack times too when he can turn to his love of gardening and home handyman jobs (neither of which, note, are far from the phone).

In spite of everything Russell gets a great deal of satisfaction knowing that a day has gone well (as most do) when he's been under real pressure. His wide background knowledge and experience stand him in good stead, as does his ready ability to enjoy a good laugh.

"Really it's all a matter of good public relations," he concludes.

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