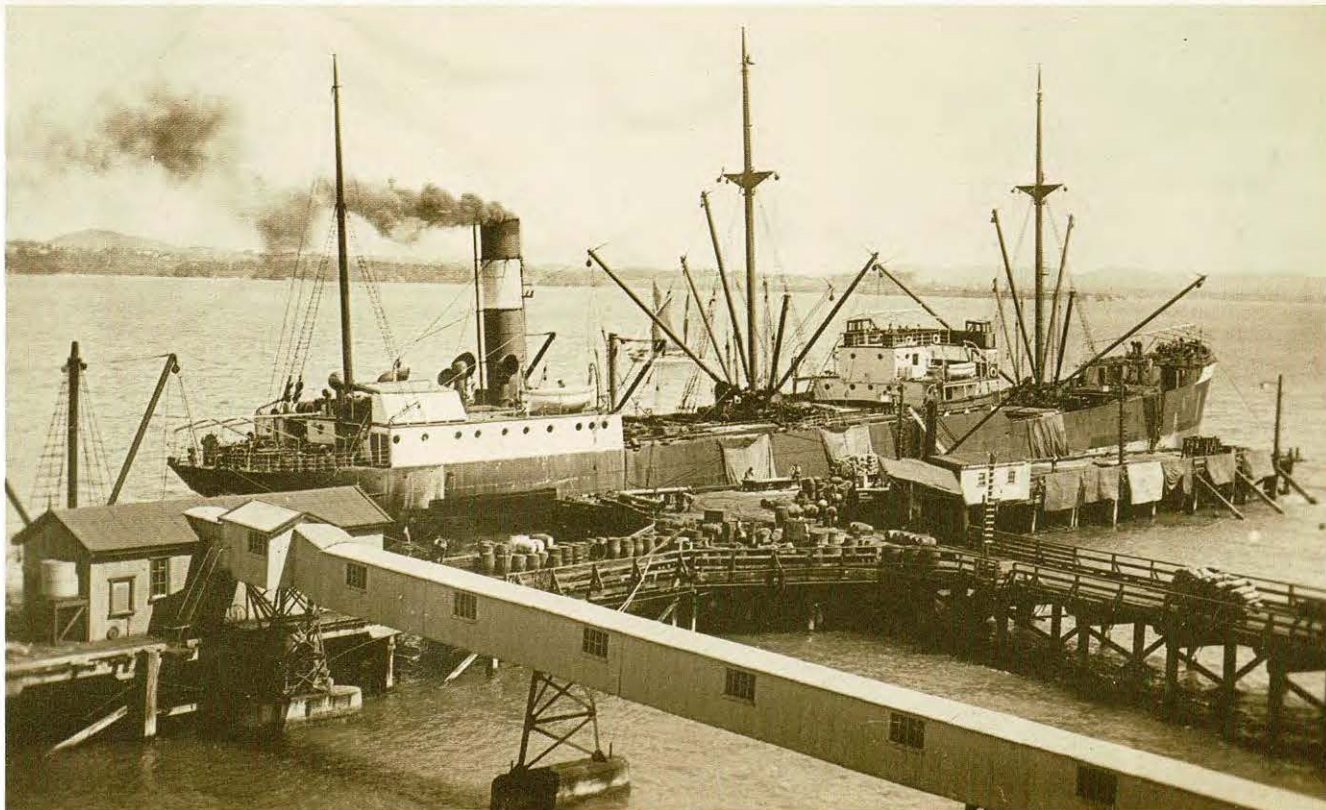


The harbour and the wharves

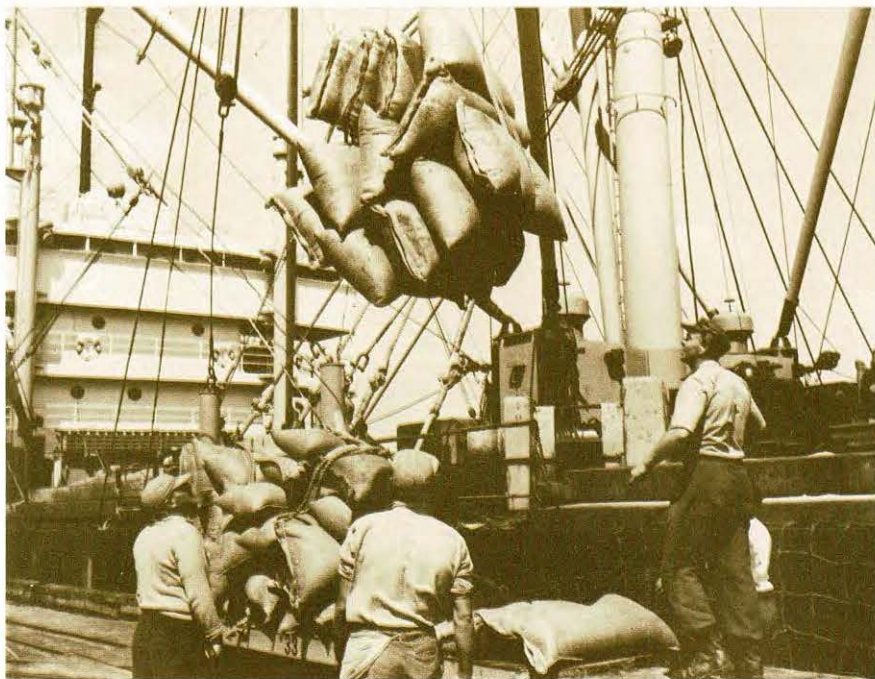


Most sugar workers walked to Chelsea but all else arrived by sea. To the left of this photo, two narrow piers received coal boats and ferries, while the photo itself shows the sugar and lighter wharves. It was a noisy, busy scene, cluttered with men, horses, barrels, sugar rakes and all the paraphernalia of unloading. The covered elevator carried refined products to the lighter wharf, and in the shack on

the corner of the wharf, the Chelsea cooper attended the syrup barrels.

By 1948 around 15 sugar boats discharged annually. They were small vessels — none carried more than 9,500 tons of raw sugar — but they still took up to three weeks to discharge. The “Rona”, shown here, was one of three sugar boats owned by CSR — all bore the black and white funnel.

Sugar workers did not unload the boats. In the early years this was one of a number of refinery operations contracted out to casual, local labour. By the 1920's, as sugar boats called more regularly, Auckland wharfies took over. More than 120 were ferried to Chelsea each day. Divided into gangs, they first unloaded the sacks of raw sugar, then stacked them in the raw store.



“Well over half the wharfies stayed on the wharf itself. There were four gangs of 15 each unloading each ship. Each gang had eight below, two winchmen, the hatchman and four landing on the wharf ... They would load the boats on to what were called ‘rakes’ — double-bogeyed trucks running on a rail-line along the wharf. The Queensland bags were 160 pounds; the Fiji, two hundredweight; and the Cuban was three hundredweight ... each rake might have up to three tons of sugar.”

Queensland sugar is being unslung here — 12 sacks to each rake. The waiting wharfies had a precise formula for loading the rakes to ensure stability and to avoid having to cart the slings up the wharf. Sugar workers admired this skill, envied the finesse with which they could spin out the work, but were aghast at the fish hooks and mouse-traps used to snare the “tame” ducks on the lakes.

It was a steep climb up to the raw store. Both the horses and their drivers were sent over from Auckland. Just as the same wharfies invariably worked the sugar boats — the “sugar royals” — so too these horses were no strangers to Chelsea.

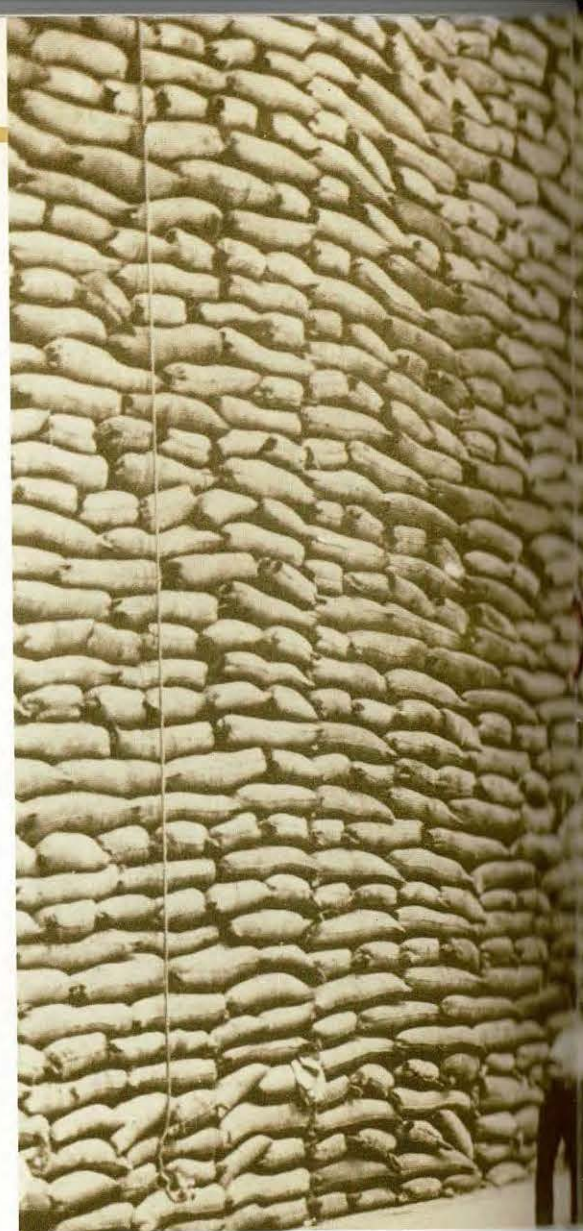
“Those old horses did the job so often they knew it by heart. When they got to the weighbridge — beside the office at the top of the sugar wharf — they would stop, wait for the electric bell and move

on up to the raw store ... Then, when they were unhitched, they would wander back down again. There was one old horse that knew to come into the stoke-hole and turn on the tap for a drink. He never turned it off again though ...”

Many sugar workers sympathised with the horses.

“They had to work a darn sight harder than we did. Those rakes themselves must have weighed a ton. After they were loaded, if it had been a wet day, you could see their feet slipping on the sugar wharf ...”

The raw store was a resounding cavern of a building with hand-shaped beams, still visible today. Sugar stacks forty feet high were built by wharfies according to an exact formula of stability. At any one time in the 1920's, between twenty and thirty thousand tons of





The raw store, 1890's. The skills of stacking survived until 1958.

raw sugar awaited "cutting-in" here. This photo was taken in the 1890's, but the procedure had not really changed 60 years later.

"Alf Norton was in charge of the watersiders in the raw store and he was there for donkeys' years. It was a work of art. When those stacks went up they were absolutely straight. They took pride in their work and they interlocked the stacks to bind them. Every sixth or seventh tier was what they called a 'binder'. They had the old water hydraulics for power. The bloke at the bottom would just pull on a piece of string and the bag would shoot up thirty feet. They were heavy bags. So when the bag came up over the top, the man up there would come out and meet it on the run. He'd use the movement of the bag to just drop it where he wanted it. He was the 'stacker'. He had another bloke up there with him

with a hook. He was the 'straightener'. He'd just look down the edge and line the bag up ..."

The lighter wharf lay next to the sugar wharf. Here the refinery's six lighters were loaded with refined sugar before being towed with their one-man crews to Auckland. From the sugar elevator the 70lb sugar bags were placed in the lighter hold by the warehouse gang.

"At one point I was loading the bags as they came from the chutes. We'd build a 'stage' at the bottom from sugar bags, and the boss would stand beside that and position the bags as they came down. Then we'd get our backs under it and off we'd go like a bunch of niggers. We had to make certain we stacked the bags so we could walk over each row and make the job easier. We used to put 400

tons in the lighters in under four hours. When I first started there were about 11 jokers loading the lighters. Those watersiders used to stare at the way we worked. They didn't have to work like we did ..."

From the 1880's to the 1950's the sugar lighters were a familiar aspect of harbour life. Each crossing took half-an-hour. Once at Kings Wharf another gang slung the bags from the lighters for storage on the wharf for distribution throughout New Zealand.

The lighter (next page) is the "Tui". It was one of six built at the Chelsea slipway by the refinery's shipwrights. Each was around 96 feet long and could carry 200 tons of refined sugar. The same shipwrights, working with little more than hand-tools, also built a diesel tug, the "Maro", in 1940.



A self-contained community

"Everything necessary to the manufacture and efficient running of the business is here. With its own water supply, wharves and power house the plant is a model example of a self-contained community."

And so it had to be. Isolated from Auckland, everything had to be locally available. Night shift breakdowns were repaired on the spot and in the early years a critically injured sugar worker might wait till morning for a boat to Auckland. Older workers can remember when even the pay packets were ferried across the harbour.

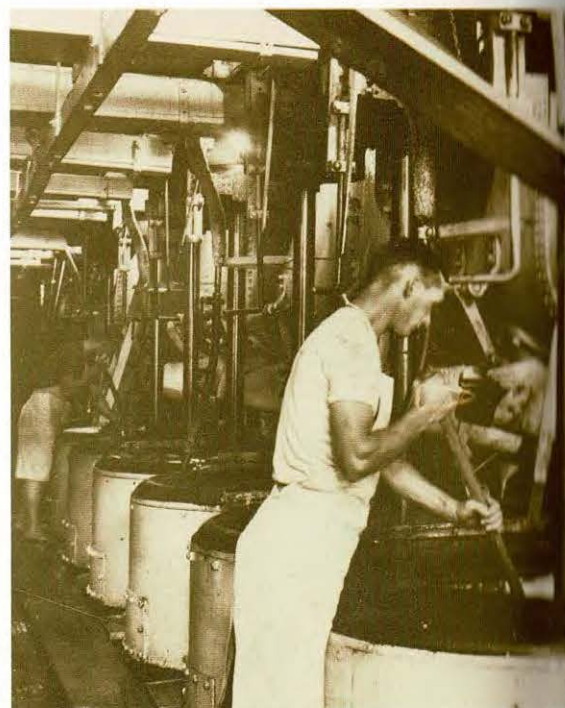
"In the early days they used to pay in gold sovereigns, but when I used to get the pay it was in notes and coins. I used to take a ferry across to the old office in town - where the wharf police station is now. I'd pick up a couple of jokers there and go and get the money from the BNZ. Sometimes, in the latter years, it might be as much as £8,000. Going

back on the ferry I had my leather bag strapped to my wrist and my Smith & Wesson revolver in my pocket. I had an escort going back — an old fellow. What he could do I don't know. He had a gun too. Before my time they had to row the paymaster from Birkenhead to Chelsea. That was a tough row, but there weren't ferry boats at the right times then."

By the 1950's, there were 450 workers at Chelsea. Less than half actually refined sugar. Most worked at the extra tasks that kept this self-sufficient refinery going. A sugar worker might be a carpenter, plumber, painter, gardener, electrician, engine driver, fitter, turner, greaser, cooper, tinsmith, tailor, blacksmith, shipwright, sailor, or sailmaker — a who's who of trades and skills.

"You name it, they had it ... the only job I can remember being done outside was by Stewart and Longbottom, the coppersmiths."

Fugal workers, 1930's. The fugals show the balance of man and machine in the inter-war years.



The tough place of Auckland

"There was a feeling in Birkenhead among a lot of people who didn't really know what was going on down at the sugar works, particularly in the bag filters, that it wasn't a very nice place to work."

"I was involved in the union for a long time. In those circles it was known as the tough place of Auckland."

The inter-war years weren't as rugged as the 1880's. Then sugar workers routinely worked 60 and 70 hours a week. According to a works' tradition that was put right by "King Dick".

"The story goes that the PM — Seddon — went through the works with a parliamentary crowd. He asked them how long they worked, and said he'd alter all that when he got back to parliament. So they got the eight hours."

Yet eight hours did not mean eight easy hours. The refinery week was based around three shifts a day, Monday to Saturday morning — the rhythm of work broken only by Sundays and the public holidays. In the early years the heavy summer demand of fruit canners had allowed

a lower winter melt, but by the 1950's the pace was uniformly relentless.

In their jobs sugar workers battled heat and dust, dirt and water, and a devil's symphony of noise, in a refinery that placed a premium on manual work.



The "cutting-in" station illustrates the manual nature of refinery work. Sacks of raw sugar were unstacked, then had their throats slit open over a grating which led to the first stage of the refining procedure. On day-shift enough sugar for the night-shift to process had to be cut-in. Four men wielded the brick-sharpened knives used to slit the sacks. They took care to start at the bottom of the pile, lest a torrent of sugar impede their vision. Other men stood ready to leap in with mallets and pound any lumps of raw sugar. Cuban sugar was especially notorious for this. Still more men had the delicate task of unstacking the raw sugar sacks, loading them into carts, and guiding these along the labyrinth of rail-lines to the cutting-in station. This "labour intensive" style of work was typical of Chelsea before 1958.

As Chelsea jobs went the cutting-in station wasn't too bad. Neither were the raw centrifugals, which spun at high speeds to fling surface impurities from raw sugar crystals. Yet the "fugals" do show the balance between man and machine in the inter-war refinery. The fugals were not automatic. Here two fugalmen use wooden scoops to scrape off raw sugar under the rim

of the fugals. Depending on the size of the melt, there would be one or two fugalmen per shift. Each would move from one fugal to the next, filling them with the heavy brown "magma" syrup, starting the fugals, shutting them off, then scraping and emptying.

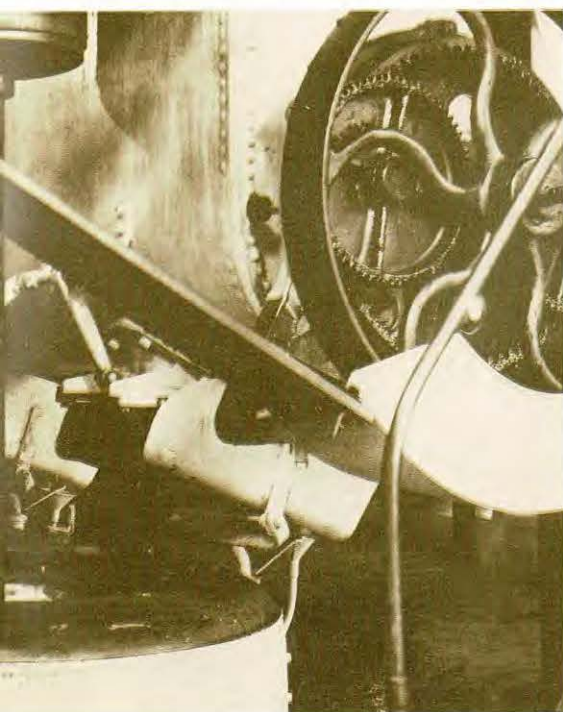
The rear fugalman's bare feet were not unusual at Chelsea. As no protective clothing was provided by the sugar company, most sugar workers wore as little as possible. Clothes were not to be needlessly dirtied in the 1920's and 1930's, and wives still recall the difficulties of removing Chelsea grime from their husbands' clothes.

The huge drive belt above the nearer fugalman powered the fugals, but was also a source of danger.

"We never saw any danger but putting the belts on and off the fugals could be dangerous. On one occasion a young fellow — it was his very first night — put his hand down and it was chopped off as quick as lightning. He hardly knew what had happened. Just sat down and smoked a cigarette. We had to get a boat to take him to hospital in the middle of the night."

There were jobs far worse than these. In the char end the dust settled everywhere, but most sugar workers agree that the worst job of the 1920's was in the filters.

"The worst job when I got there was where the sugar was filtered. In those days they had a series of cabinets with these long bags, and the sugar liquor went through these bags. All the muck collected in the bags which were taken down and thrown in big tanks full of water. They used to have to wash the bags out. There would be four or five jokers standing in about three feet of water, and they would be stark naked with just a bit of filter cloth around their waists. Those young buggers used to skylark and if you walked underneath you might get a whole crop of muck down your neck."



Stack 'em straight next time

Two of the more prestigious jobs were those of sugar boiler and liquor runner. Both called for skill and close attention. The sugar boiler for example, had to gauge by naked eye the forming of the white sugar crystals. Any error would be costly to a refinery which hated waste. Yet even these jobs had their unpleasant aspects.

"I first started as char digger on night shift. That is in the char end where they used charcoal to remove the colour impurities. Now, a lot of residue used to settle on top of the char. My job was to shut off the liquor, wait for it to get down, take the lid off and stir it about with a long spear — maybe 10 foot long. By God, that was a tiring job. There might be eight or 12 cisterns to keep going. Now the char digger was the liquor runner's assistant. And next I became liquor runner. That was a tough hot job. The sugar temperature was as high as 180 degrees and you couldn't help getting burnt every so often."

Next to sugar itself the 70lb hessian sugar bag was Chelsea's most famous product. Their making shows the self-sufficient nature of the refinery and the demands of sugar works life.

An "official" description of the bag making machine was published in 1929.

"The bags in which the refined sugar is packed for distribution are made on the premises by a marvellous machine that takes the roll of sacking, brands it at regular intervals, folds it, sews the side seams, cuts it off in sections and finishes by sewing the ends ... the bags are inside out when they come off the machine but a youth performs a miracle over a stick over which he places the bags ... and turns the bags inside out in a fraction of a second. Working on 70lb bags, the machine can turn out 8,000 a day ..."

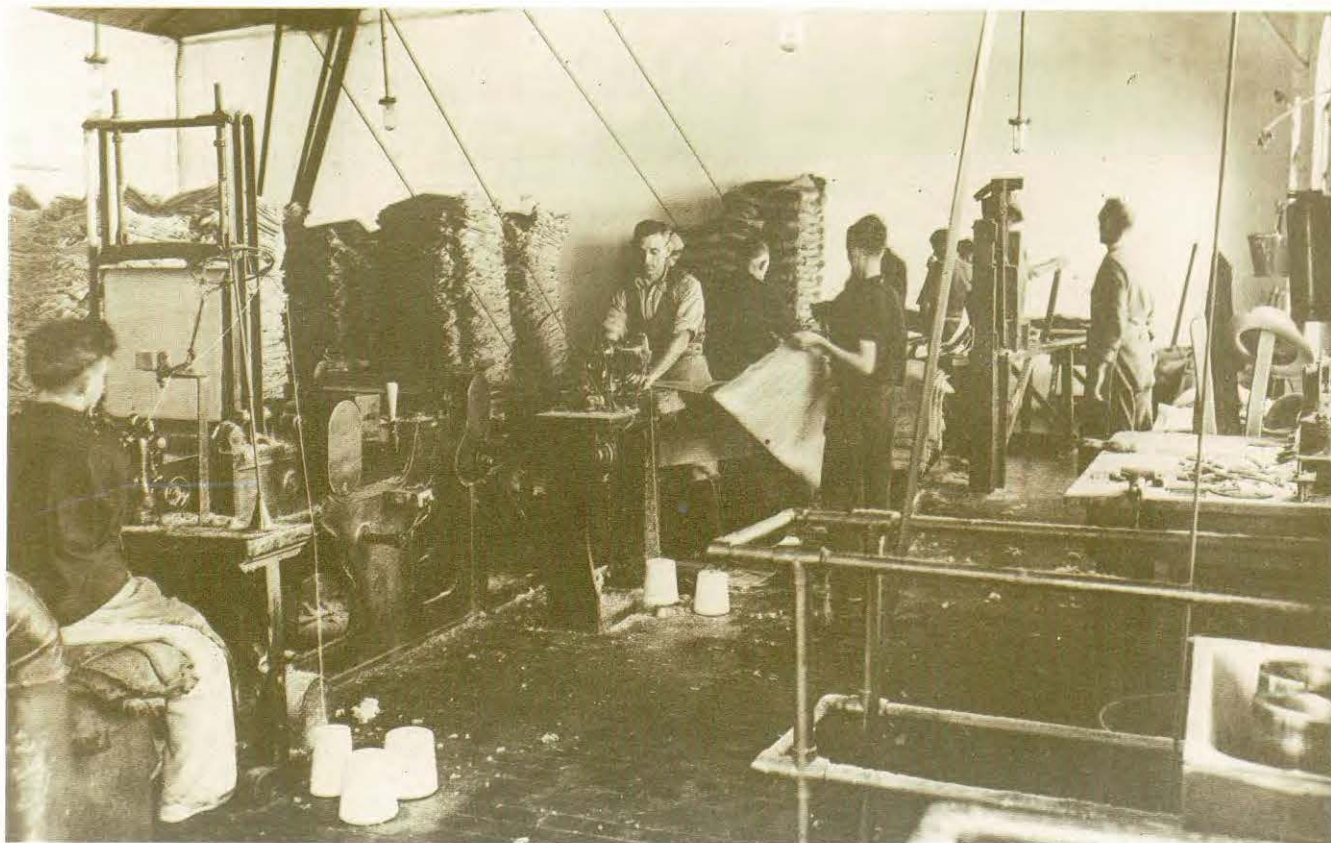
In reality the "marvellous" machine was operated by around nine men

or boys under the scrutiny of the bag shop boss. An old bag shop veteran described the process as he saw it.

"... the machine branded the hessian behind the man on the left, who was sewing a continuous side seam ... the next man was sewing the bottoms. The boy flicked it to a man standing back-to-back to him. He sewed the tops leaving a tube for the sugar pipe ..."

The bag shop was not an easy option. By the 1950's three men stood by their poles turning sacks all day — "a soul-destroying job". The men at the machine were no better off.

"When I first started there I swept the floors ... then I stacked and counted bags. My first stack — it wasn't straight. So the boss pushed it over and said: 'you stack 'em straight next time'. By God, I did too. That was hard times then. The fellow who sewed the tops ... they had to sew 2,000 a day, and the





The clatter is deafening

"In the long bagging room the clatter is deafening. The chutes jerk up and down all the while to keep the sugar in motion and the vibration shakes the whole building."

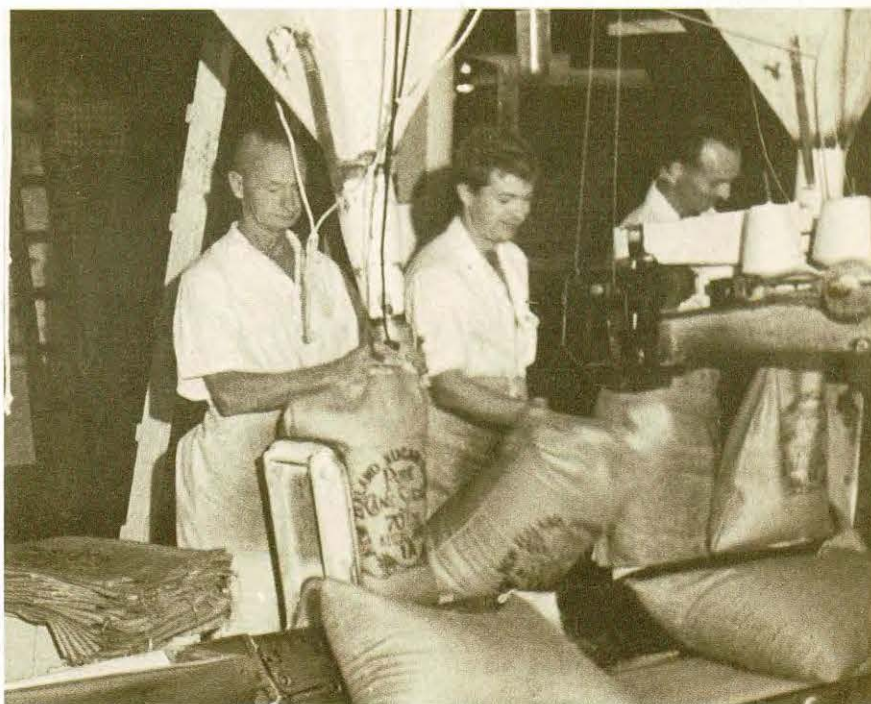
"In the warehouse there was 20 to 30 men, packing the 70lb bags and the 140lb sacks. In the early days it was all done by needle and palm, then they got those machines. There were two fillers for every one sewer. It was noisy in there all right. The vibrators on the floor above sorted the sugar, and there might be a dozen chutes operating."

jokers sewing bottoms did 25 a minute. When I left the bag shop they were doing 32 a minute. The old methods just weren't making enough. Sewing bag bottoms was a bad job. You had to stand there all the time and keep going. Pick it up and sew with your right hand and cut with your left. I've seen my fingers bleed it was that cold ... Also there was a terrible amount of fluff in the bag room. My eyes went a bit too — all you would see was those stitches going along."

The seventy-pounders had many uses. In the depression they clothed the navy or the poor. In less wretched but still austere years they were an attractive little floor mat, the universal carry-all, and a handy measure of shell-fish.

Nothing was wasted at the sugar works either. Used char was sold for fertiliser, and every last spillage of sugar was processed. Raw sugar sacks were washed to extract the residual sugar, then sorted and repaired. The better ones returned to the sugar mills, those more frail being sold in Auckland.

Around 10 men sewed the holes from the used sacks. As the five here stand at their "machines" they sport intriguing headgear and intense concentration — the latter a response to both the camera and the poor light.





Engineer and workers on the end dam, 1917.

"It was my work and if I didn't work I starved."

"George Dempster was a good bloke to work for. But the others before that — you were treated like a blimmin' criminal. You were afraid to sneeze."

Most sugar workers feel a measure of pride at the way they responded to the demands of the sugar works, and accept that such tough conditions were "appropriate to the times". It was a bitter world outside.

"During the depression ... there was a fence outside the gate by the watchman's office. Often there'd be over 20 unemployed men just sitting or standing there, waiting for someone to get hurt or sacked."

This was a pre-welfare generation, brought up to believe that "you were lucky to have a job then — any job was a good one." There were no illusions about quitting Chelsea for a ferry ride to industrial paradise. But while the work was accepted, some of the bosses were resented.

"We got word over from Australia that the Black Prince was coming over. He was a short coot, only about five feet high. But he had the hide of a rhinoceros."

"It was a hard company. We had a chief engineer in the 1930's. By jove, if you didn't do as he said ... we called him the Black Prince. That was the polite name. He was not a very nice man ... One night the wife and I were out walking in Birkenhead. We met the Black Prince and his wife — she was a lovely woman. I raised my hat, but the Black Prince just looked away so he wouldn't have to recognise us. Today you'd put your fist into him. That was typical of the bosses then."

Bosses and workers had a realistic idea of their positions.

"The managers had to be boss. I understood that. You did as you were told or else ... We had a lot of fun but never answered the bosses back. In later years the leading hands could stick up for their rights. None of us could."

Yet in the entire inter-war period there was only one strike at Chelsea.

"We went on strike for six weeks in 1920. The men decided to form a union. Of course there were some communists ... the secretary said the only thing to do is go on strike ... the company could not afford to lose any time so they gave us what we wanted ... but before being taken

The Black Prince was the polite name

on again we had to line up in front of the dining room. Mr Campbell said 'we don't want you, or you, or you ...' But we did get a rise."

"What they wanted to go on strike for I still do not know. That was the downfall of all the workers who were in the Provident Fund ... I started the year after the strike and we were not allowed to join the Provident Fund ..."

Four years later an Arbitration Court judge visited Chelsea.

"I have never seen such hypocrisy in all my life. The manager went down to meet Judge Frazer at the Chelsea wharf. He actually got down on one knee ... That day the power house got washed down for the first time in its history. They even put matting down on the floor ... The men that used to work in the sack wash shed — they wore a loin cloth only — the company sent them up to the bush for the day. Then Judge Frazer walks in, puts his hands on his lapels, and says 'My, what an ideal place to work in.' All the matting came up five minutes after he left. When it came to the court they actually took three-pence a week off us. Then the company turned around and gave it back. They just wanted to make a point."

A sugar-daddy company

Clearly many of the stories which are common knowledge among older sugar workers are recalled more for their drama than their typicality. Yet they do reinforce the idea that a vast gap separated manager from worker, and an even greater gap separates both from today's standards and attitudes.

The gap between boss and worker was measured in clothing, stance, accent and housing. In the inter-war years most bosses were Australian — the workers, New Zealanders or British. The photo of the dam construction in 1917 shows the distinction between the two groups. The chief engineer's confident stance marks his authority. All the bosses wore suits while the white coats of the chemists made the term "white coat" a synonym for "boss" or "head".

By contrast the photo of the workers' dining room, taken three decades later, not only shows a more practical approach to clothing, but also suggests the strong camaraderie which developed among sugar workers.

Between the bosses and the sugar workers were the clerical workers and foremen. Although distinguishable by their clothing — even a foreman wore a tie — all

remember their years at Chelsea in the same terms as the sugar workers.

Clerical workers had a very heavy workload. In the 1920's five men handled the administration of the refinery. Cumbersome letter-press books and handwriting were only gradually superseded by typewriters and even then the office workers had to do their own typing. Worst of all was the office itself. Before 1948 it lay at the foot of the sugar wharf.

"It was very cold in the old office in winter. The strong southerly winds rattled the windows and the lino would lift off the floor. We had an open fire in the main and manager's offices. The chief clerk used to have a hot water bottle at his feet ... whenever a ship was discharging raw sugar the scent of horse droppings would drift in ... Huge water rats were often seen emerging from the office breakwater ..."

The real bosses — managers, chemists and engineers — did not have an easy time themselves. They were under great pressure to meet production targets and they lived in an age of strict dress and behaviour standards.

It was also still an age of paternalism. The bosses and the company took a sincere interest in

their workers. Right from the start the sugar workers were provided with housing and welfare benefits. Schemes such as the Provident Fund and the Benefit Society certainly aimed to improve the relations between worker and company. But they also looked after the future needs of workers and encouraged a sober and frugal lifestyle. Such concern was also evident in the company picnic and in the treatment of elderly workers. Men who had served the company for years were given the softer jobs as they neared retirement. Likewise during the depression of the 1930's no sugar workers were laid off. At worst some were placed on "week-on, week-off" work.

From the 1940's more New Zealanders began to rise through the company hierarchy. Many started as youths and took advantage of the sugar company's apprenticeship and in-house training schemes. Due to these schemes Chelsea's engineers were invariably experts.

"I think that's why he was called the Black Prince. He wasn't good to work for, but he knew his job. He was a really good engineer. He could fix anything ... but then most of the engineers down there had to be able to improvise in those days."



The Chelsea picnic



This was no casual day by the sea, but an elaborately-orchestrated extravaganza. The company could perform its paternal role by sponsoring a picnic on this one day of the year that, neither a Sunday nor a statutory holiday, should have been worked. Safely removed from the refinery, relations of authority could be submerged by contest and frivolity, and links with the local community sealed by turning a blind-eye to free-loaders.

The picnic tradition began around 1888 and continued well after the Second World War. This was the age of grand picnics. Sugar workers and their families revelled in an excursion, in this age when transport and holiday facilities were primitive.

The demise of the picnic coincided with changing leisure patterns which the motor car encouraged and the decline of Birkenhead as a "company town" after the 1950's.

"Everyone used to get dressed up for the picnic. It was a big outfit and organised by a committee ... I used to get the gear ready for the picnic, including the hammers for the nail-driving contests."

"It was a big day then. Come Saturday, Birkenhead would be absolutely dead. You would not see a soul."

"The picnics were a real institution in the old days. Pretty well everyone in Birkenhead and Northcote used to pile on to the old ferries and go down the gulf. Practically everybody used to go whether they were connected with the sugar works or not."

"The thing I remember best is old Charlie King's double. He comes up to you on the ferry, gives a couple of dry coughs, and pulls out his double sheet. There would be a

dozen or 15 runners in the 100 yards and the 45 yards and you would pay your shilling and stand to win a guinea or more ..."

"There would be 12 of us who used to go down on Friday afternoon after lunch ... We would go and mark out the course. Those running courses had to be spot on. They had quite a few good runners down there then. They had all sorts of races — running, egg-and-spoon race, three-legged race, visitors' race and wives' race. There were about a dozen altogether. They had stepping the chain out — the nearest to 22 yards to the exact measurement won. They used to put a string around their legs to measure out a yard. They had nail driving contests, guessing contest (how many beans in a bottle, the length of a bit of string in a bottle — that bit was the manager's job). All the "nobs" — the managers and the bosses — they were nearly always



Aussies. They kept to themselves - sat in their own little cliques. But then everybody sat in their own little groups for lunch. The men all wore white flannels ... and the prizes were really good. One of the best parts was the singing on the ferry coming back ..."



The needle-threading contest . (Picnic photos courtesy of Alice O'Callahan).

There was a good feeling

A vital aspect of the refinery atmosphere was the good feeling which arose among sugar workers. The picnic was an annual event, but every day there were practical jokes and pranks — many unnoticed by the bosses.

All workers had their nick-names, to the point where real names might be unknown except at home.

"Everyone had their nicknames. Some were real characters in those days. There was one chap — Nobby, we called him. He'd been around the world as a hobo, and he kept his money in a sock because he didn't trust banks. One day a bloke bet that I wasn't game to hook that sock out of Nobby's pocket. Well, he came into the workshop to have some fugal scoops sharpened, so I got a big stick with a bent nail on the end ... by God, if I'd been standing any closer I'd still be looking for my head."

Workers never knew what to expect on nightshift.

"There was a lot of skylarking on nightshift. One time a chap called Turner emptied a 7lb tin of golden syrup over my head — we had no showers in those days. Some of it

was plain foolishness. Alan Ryan — he was a fireman — picked up a handful of soot and threw it at Doug Cooper. It knocked him out. Alan hadn't realised there was a bolt in it."

Naturally a lot of the humour was aimed at the bosses. They too had nicknames — "Black Prince", "Kilroy", "Aspro", ("he was an aspro-man ... In the afternoon he'd be asleep at the back of the store") and "Hippo".

"Old Hippo Wilson wasn't a bad bloke. Just looked like a hippo. We had a bloke down there that could draw anything. One time he was in the engineers' store and he drew this hippo with Wilson's head on it. Next thing Hippo Wilson was standing behind him. He waited till he had finished and said 'Now you can bloody rub it out.'

"Old Bill Dean was a character. Bill and I made some special packing cases for an engineer going back to Australia. Now in those days wild cats used to come down from the bush. Spit fire would these things. Well, one walked into the shop. Bill chased it and it ran into the case. So we just put the top on and sent it up to the engineer."

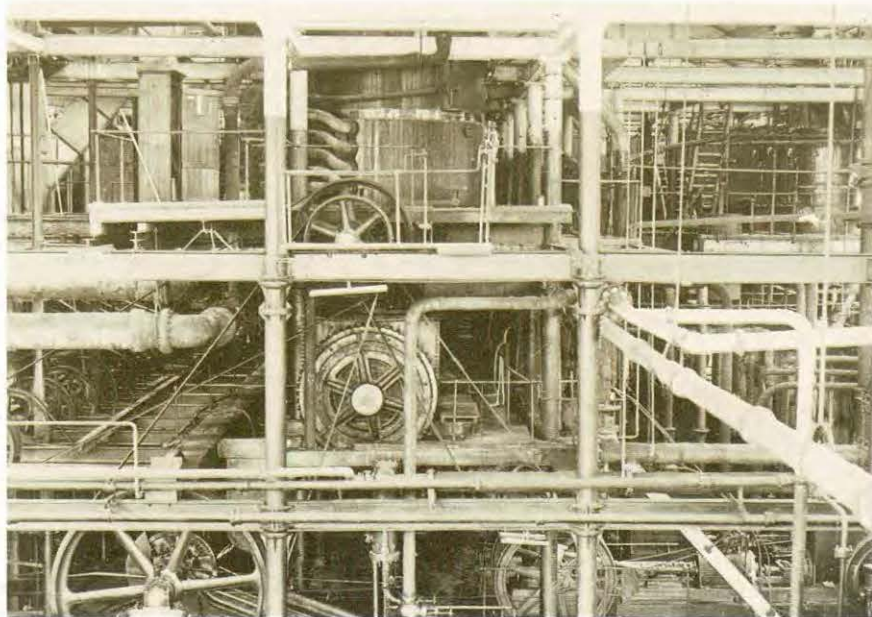
"Another bloke must have got sacked eight times. They just couldn't get rid of him, 'cause he'd turn up the next morning ... One time he got caught in the raw fugals with a cigarette — unlit mind you. The boss sacks him, but this bloke says 'Christ, if you'd caught me with a fishing rod you'd have sacked me for fishing up here'."

Sugar workers knew all the techniques for walking past the bosses with bags of sugar under their coats. On one famous occasion even an anvil was lifted for a "dare".

Another aspect of this feeling among the men was sport. Every lunch-time serious games of cricket, soccer or rugby league (when the soccer ball burst) were played on the ashes by the dams, as sugar workers risked grazed knees and a swim for the ball.

A number of workers drew enjoyment from their jobs. The internal landscape of the refinery was dominated by huge drive belts all connected to the massive engines of the power house.

"For 25 years I was in the power house. And you had to stay there until you were relieved because of all those great ropes flying about at 430 revs a minute. If one of them burst you could have a bad accident ... If everything was going we had 15 engines. It was amazing but you could stand there and if a bearing was getting hot, I'd tell you which one it was. And you could tell if it was grease or oil or what was wrong ... There were just two of us on duty, the greaser and myself and there would be two firemen on each shift looking after the boilers. If you stopped or neglected your work, that bugged up the whole plant. I still loved the work and if I had my time over again I would still do that work. There was nothing more magnificent or beautiful than to see those great big cranks going. All that power was a monumental tribute to man ..."



The internal landscape of Chelsea, 1930's. Belts and wheels linked to the powerhouse.

In 1954 a sugar worker (anonymous but believed to be a plumber) captured the feeling at the works in a good-humoured ballad. The crisis it described was real, but within four years the world it portrayed was changed.

*The fruit had started to ripen, there was talk of making jams,
But when it came to sugar, well it wasn't worth a dam,
For the mighty stores at Chelsea, had become so mighty weak,
Because they put the boys that make it, on a forty hour week.*

*So Sidney Joseph Holland, decides to make a stand,
He said produce more sugar, or we fetch from distant land.
And if you can't produce it, by hell, and strike a light,
I will charter ships with sugar in, to put our shortage right.*

*To make the pound go further, we must have jam galore,
And if we have no sugar, you will hear the housewife roar,
With Walter on our door-step, and the cost of living high,
And coming on election time, it's sugar or we die.*

*Then the Sydney Toffs got cracking, and decide to make a plan,
For two thousand ton of sugar, we pay fifteen quid each man,
The time allowed is ten weeks, for you to reach the score,
But if it takes just eight weeks, we pay you three quid more.*

*So Joe called us together, it was in the Dining Hall,
He told us of this bonus, for a melt that seemed so tall,
And may our thoughts be pardoned, if we thought it rather grim,
For the bonus rate from out the past, had been sir, rather thin.*

*Joe outlined all the details, and then outlined the cause,
But to us it seemed the CSR were playing Santa Claus.
He said, "Boys you can make it, if you heed the White Coats call,
With your good honest sweat boys, we'll build that stack that tall".*

*Some thought of all the patches, the wire and bits of string,
And as for extra sugar, well, it didn't mean a thing.
Then a voice rang out amongst us, it said "Struth and stone the crows",
If the tubes blow out in boilers, down the drain the whole thing goes".*

*But Joe was optimistic, and spoke out with a grin,
He spoke of backing horses, with ten on the nose to win.
Then a voice spoke out with caution, and said, "If I punt on race,
I put one on the nose to win, sir, but I put another for a place".*

*Now the boys have all decided, to give this job a go,
And if through manpower shortage, they end a few tons below.
And though the horse with tenner on, has fallen in the race,
Remember sir, the bloke that had a quid on for a place.*

*And if you walk into the work-shops, among the shambles and the dust,
You will see them there with badges up, "2000 tons or bust".
And if you hear some noises, like the singing of a bird,
It's the joy of getting fifteen quid, and not just but a third.*

IT'S ALL PUSH-BUTTON NOW

By the 1950's many of Chelsea's operations and attitudes were out-moded. Once an efficient "chemical factory", the refinery now sought the role and image of a modern "food factory".

"The staff's way down now. They've only got about 200 down there now but they're doing twice as much work as we did, turning out twice as much sugar. More even. But I bet it ain't as hard as what it was, not by a long chalk."

With the advent of bulk handling in 1958 raw sugar arrived at Chelsea loose in ships' holds. A crane and grab snatch three tonnes of sugar in one scoop, then feed it into a conveyor system. While awaiting cutting-in, 40,000 tonnes is heaped into huge sugar dunes in a new raw store.

Gone are the wharfies with their horses and rakes. Bulk handling allows just a handful of employees to unload ships carrying 20,000 tonnes in half the time of the old system.

The Harbour Bridge spelt the end of the lighter fleet. By 1961 the lighters had been sold — the "Tui" is now a maritime museum in the Bay of Islands. Chelsea looks inland to the road today. Between Birkenhead and Auckland huge trucks form a regular procession. The weighbridge area of the refinery is busier than the lighter wharf ever was. No bent backs load these trucks. Fork hoists lift stacked pallets and also the 20 tonne containers used for coastal shipping. Bulk sugar tankers can transport liquid and granulated sugar direct to the manufacturer.

"They don't actually work down there any more you know. It's all push-button technology now."

Older sugar workers are stunned. Where are the crowds of workers, the craftsmen and the tough conditions that they remember? Automatic cutting-in has replaced the old raw store gang and there are no longer any sugar sacks to be sorted and washed. Fugal workers



don't wield scoops any more, but push buttons and watch gauges. The Chelsea office is now a nerve-centre of production which demands the new skills of the computer.

Even the old sugar bag had to go. The bag room and warehouse could never have kept up with modern demands and the grocery trade itself was changing. Supermarkets, with self-service and pre-packaged goods, were replacing the corner store. Chelsea responded by installing "Hesser" machines in 1961 to make and fill smaller paper bags of sugar with minimal human supervision. The new "Chelsea" brand-name marked the advent of the consumer age and the modern refinery.

"When I first came into the refinery it was in the Victorian era ... when I came out it was starting to emerge into the twentieth century."

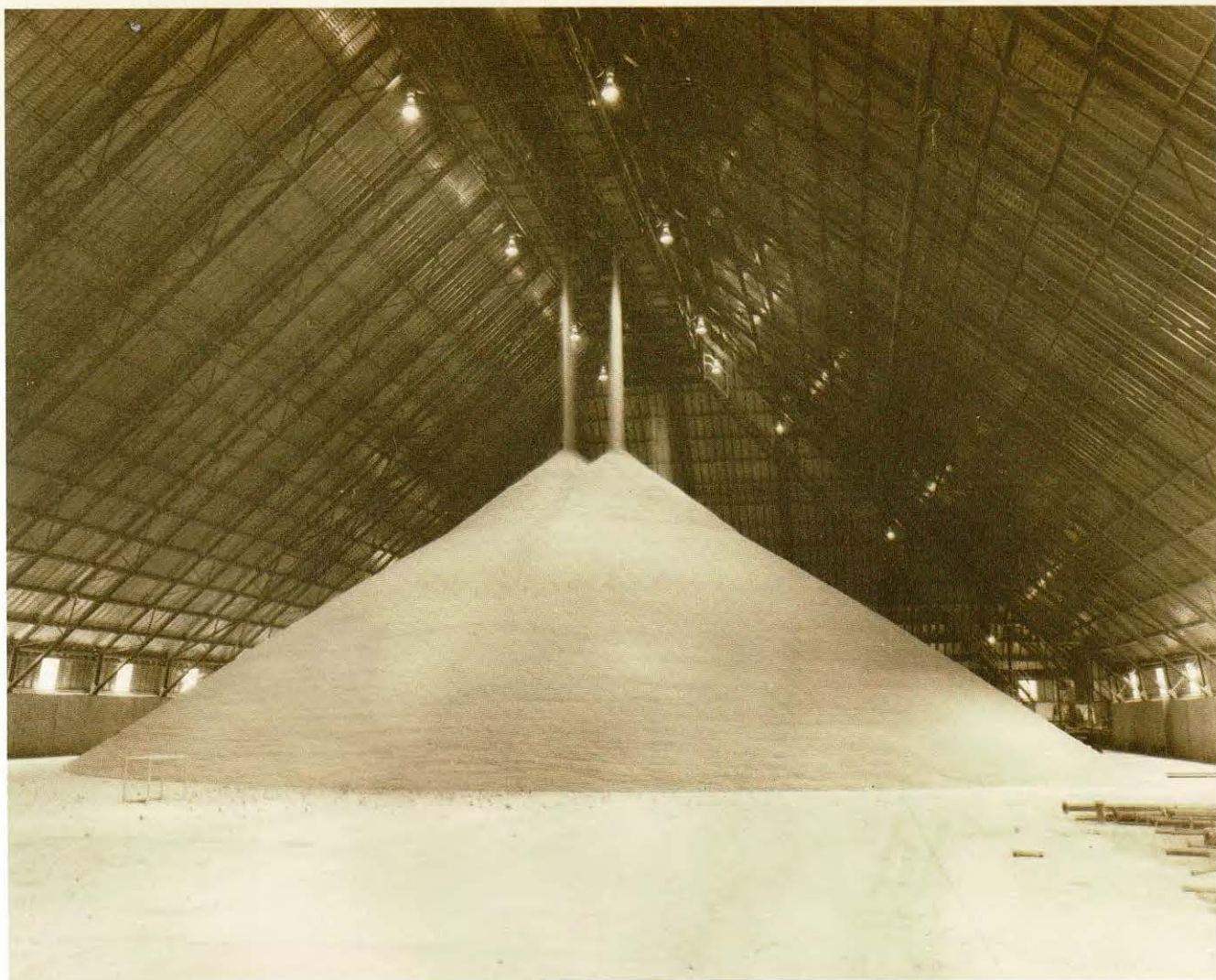
Attitudes had to change as well. A new generation of managers ensured that workers whose jobs were lost through automation were kept on until they retired. And these new bosses "... don't think of

themselves as any different like in our day."

Chelsea is more pleasant in other ways. A house-keeping campaign did away with the debris that had always disfigured the refinery. A war was waged against accidents. Dangerous areas were upgraded, the old rope drives were replaced by independent motors and safety awareness was promoted. Today Chelsea has one of the lowest accident rates of all food-processing factories.

Employees play a different role in the refinery today. Automation requires supervision and thought, not manual labour. Initiative awards recognise that good ideas come from the factory as well as the office. A thriving Social Club is run by employees themselves and boasts an ex-Premier (Albert Henry) among its past presidents.

Chelsea is a more open place today. School and group visits are welcomed. The refinery is no longer hidden in an isolated corner of Auckland but it is surrounded by a



residential city. Local residents flocked to a recent Open Day organised by employees. What was once a dreaded source of smoke is better known today for its scenic lakes and gardens which are an asset to the whole community.

These modern employees could never be mistaken for inter-war workers. They drive to Chelsea and once there are given overalls and other protective clothing. There are no children at Chelsea today, but there are more women including one among the rugged Refinery Services Group.



Not all has changed at Chelsea. The final product tastes no different and a unique blend of old and new can be seen in the heart of the refinery. Here, new techniques and attitudes are at ease with the bricks and rafters of the nineteenth century. But where old and new really come together is at the annual "25 year" dinner where the modern company honours its veteran sugar workers. They, in turn, can recreate the atmosphere of an older sugar works.

"It was hard work down there at the sugar works — not like it is today. It's much more pleasant there today. But if you look around those old workers — we've all done all right for ourselves. We've got our own homes, our families have been educated. Lots of families that turned their noses up at the sugar works in the old days couldn't say that."



The veteran, Ernie France (far right) today.



To mark the centenary of Chelsea, the New Zealand Sugar Company commissioned an historian — Peter Luke — to research and write about its oral history. Both the oral approach and the “warts and all” treatment are a welcome innovation in the field of company centennial publications in New Zealand.

The writer thanks the company for the opportunity to create a different sort of company history. Grateful thanks are due also to his co-writers — retired Chelsea employees and their families. Enthusiastically and without exception they shared their memories of a vanished life style. Jane Winton designed the layout of this booklet. Her great interest in the idea of a new type of company history and her skill as a graphic artist have made an appreciable and appreciated contribution to the booklet.

Unless otherwise stated all photographs are from the archives of the New Zealand Sugar Company. The writer thanks Grant Watson for permission to draw on his unpublished earlier study — *The Chelsea Sugar Works: An Oral Account* (University of Auckland 1979). The two quotations on page 3 are from James K. Baxter's *Stonegut Sugar Works, Junkies and the Fuzz, Ode to Auckland and other Poems* (Cavemen Press, Dunedin, 1972); and K. Hancock's *Albert Henry: His Life and Times* (Methuen, Auckland, 1979). The taped interviews upon which this booklet is based are deposited with the New Zealand Sugar Company.

