



Trevor Elwood's 'Big Red Noisy Shit bucket'

OWNER DRIVER
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MAKE/MODEL: Western Star 4964 FXT
ENGINE: Detroit DD15 EGR
POWER: 560hp (418Kw)/1850lb/ft
TRANSMISSION: 18-speed Eaton UltraShift Plus AMT
FINAL DRIVE: 4.30:1
GCM: 90,000kg

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The factory-fresh Western Star 4900FX

Black and WHITE

Just how far has truck technology come over the past four decades? In our latest on-road duel — Highway 31 — Matt Wood with the able assistance of Steve Brooks will find out by taking a survivor from the '70s, a 1975 White 4000 and its modern-day incarnation, a brand-new Detroit powered Western Star 4900FX, on a ride up Razor Back, through the Hole in the Wall and over Bendooley Hill, among other old highway landmarks

BIRD SCARER, screamin' demon, Jimmy, window rattler, mobile oil leak, and even Driptrait Diesel. The old two-stroke GM Detroit diesel can be called a lot of names, not all of them complimentary. It's an engine famed as much for its aural drama as for its ability to drink copious amounts of fuel and leave an oily smudge of nostalgia floating in a highway sky.

But it's not until you've driven one that you realise just how far heavy-duty diesel engine technology has come. The Detroit brand revived and prospered as a leader in truck engine technology with the computerised Series 60 back in the 1990s. Yet for a whole generation of steerers, the sound of an old GM engine converting fuel into heavy-metal fury brings about a misty-eyed affection.

I'm a little young to have seen the GM Detroit's heyday, but I have heard many a folklore shrouded talk down memory lane.

So of all the old trucks I've driven over the years, none were GM powered. I've spent plenty of time

with various Detroit Series 60s, DD13s and DD15s, but the venerable two-cycle ancestor? No.

I figured it may be time for me to take a look at this classic engine and reflect on the massive changes in trucks since the highways of the 1960s, '70s and '80s.

BLAST FROM THE PAST

Enter Trevor Elwood and his 1975 White 4000, which is affectionately known as the 'Big Red Noisy Shit Bucket'. This restored example looks like it's fallen through time from a Hume Highway that wound its way through the villages, towns and cities that dotted route 31 between Melbourne and Sydney.

Looking more 1970s than a Skyhooks album cover, the old White is actually the same age as Trev, born in 1975. But despite the miles that it may have travelled, according to Trev: "It's still better looking".

Behind the genuine Russ Engineering bullbar and under that timeless bonnet profile lies a naturally aspirated 9.3-litre (568ci), 318hp (237kW) 8V71

Detroit. Clinging to the backside of the green V8 is a 15-speed overdrive Road Ranger tranny.

Into the 1980s, and for many the king of the highway was the 892TTA Detroit with its twin turbochargers and seemingly adjustable redline. And while this 871 may say it's naturally aspirated, it's actually technically supercharged, as all GMs are. This is because a uniflow scavenging two-stroke needs airflow just slightly higher than atmospheric pressure to guide air and fuel through the engine. A gear-driven Roots style blower helps feed the beast. It's kind of mildly blown.

PRE WAR TECHNOLOGY

It's engine technology that can trace its roots back to the 1930s and through World War II. Two-stroke GM diesels have powered everything — from tanks, to patrol boats, to earthmoving equipment, and air-raided sirens. It can run clockwise or counter clockwise, which makes it easy to mount sideways across the

back of a bus. It was a tried-and-true technology that served as a cornerstone for many trucking businesses.

The funny thing is that it seems everybody who was involved in transport back then keeps telling me that things were so much better in the old days. So I was hoping that by taking Trev's old White 4000 for a drive I'd find out what I'd missed out on.

As an aside, I think I should mention just how humbling it is to meet someone who is more of a truck tragic than me. To say Trev is truck mad is an understatement; Trev out-geeks me by a country mile when it comes to trucking. Seriously, I am in awe.

SHAGGED OUT

This White 4000 was bought by Trevor as a project. It's a truck that he remembers from his childhood in Western Sydney. It was owned by Billy Andrews, who was a subbie for Seaton's Transport. By the time the White came into Trevor's possession it was a shagged-out tipper that had spent its twilight years groaning under the weight of demolition rubble.

The main aim of the resto was to create something that wasn't a show truck, but looked as if it had driven straight out of the late 1970s as a working truck.

There's no bling, as Trev wanted to keep the beast

honest. So after a two-and-a-half-year resto, 80 per cent of which was carried out by Sydney-based Dominico Oliveri at Oliveri Heavy Vehicle Repairs, the red 4000 finally saw light of day ... and then the engine promptly exploded.

Trev mopped the oil from his brow and started collecting parts to rebuild another GM in his possession. Then another complete engine came his way and the White was mobile again.

Many parts, such as diffs and the aforementioned bulbar, were sourced from a White 9000 that Trev used as a donor in the build.

The steel-sprung rear end now runs a highway-appropriate 4.1:1 final drive on SP40s.

The cosy 27-inch crawl through sleeper came off a Road Boss.

The truck was originally equipped with a 13-speed 'box, however, that was turfed in favour of a 15-speed overdrive at some stage in its working life. No wussy low-inertia 'box for this little black duck.

When I turned up for a drive, there was an ex-Seaton's Transport spread triaxle clamped into the White's turntable jaws. All that was required to complete the picture would be a tarp load and it would've looked at home parked in Yass's famed Gasoline Alley back in the day.

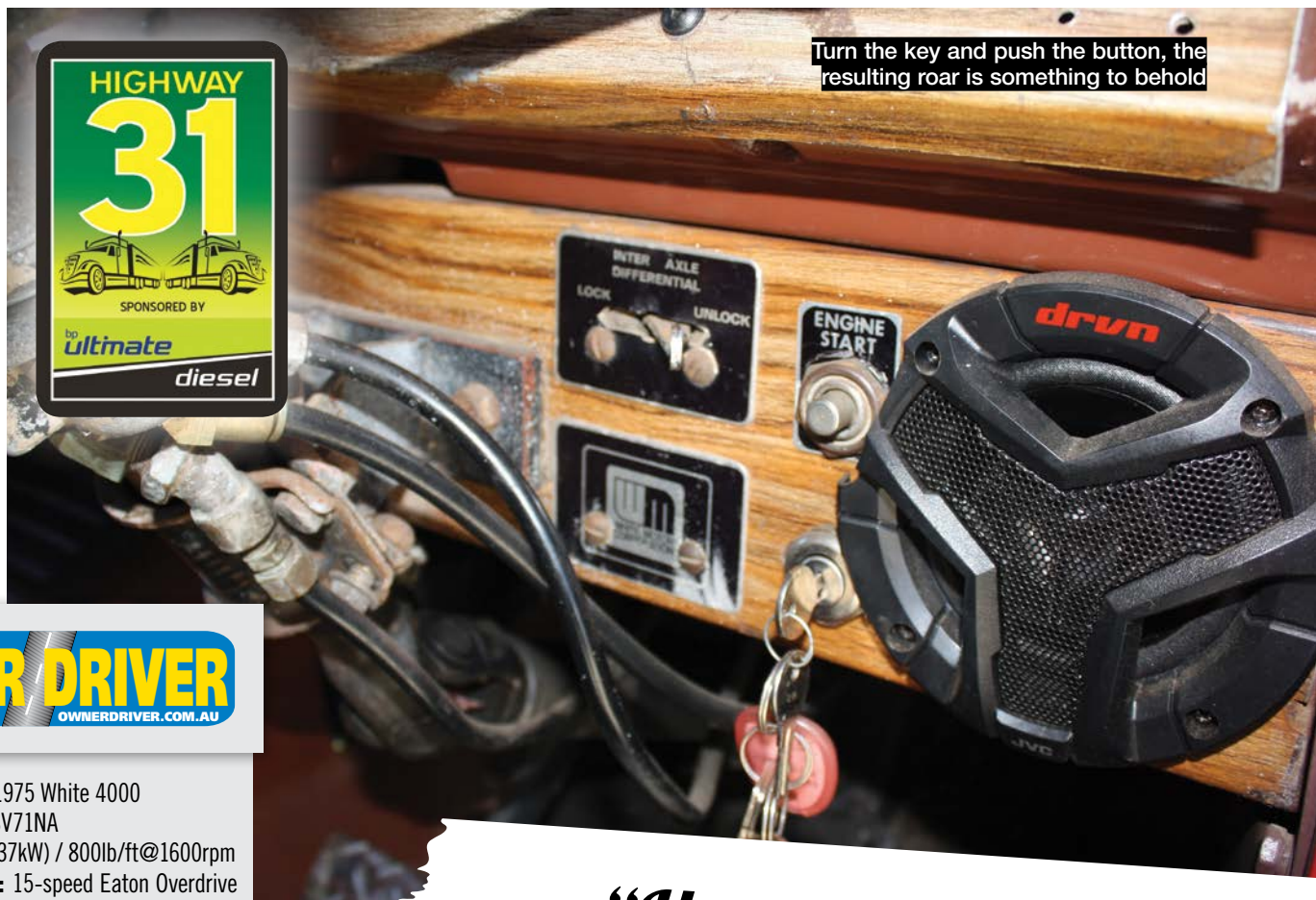
Trev asks me if I've driven a 15-speed before. I reply that I have, but not for about 15 years. He smiles and says, "All right then, see how you go".

ENGINE ROAR

The 4000's cockpit is snug, but not as skinny as an equivalent vintage Kenworth conventional. The roof line feels a little low by modern standards, but visibility is better than I expected. I park my butt in the relatively new El Dorado seat, flick on the ignition and hit the starter button.

The resulting mechanical cacophony is almost violent in its execution. The sound of a rumbling Detroit V8 is like an audio x-ray of internal combustion. The mechanical fuel system, valves sliding open and slamming shut, pistons climbing and descending in their bores, and the resulting exhaust rumble through the twin 7.0-inch sooters.





OWNER DRIVER
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MAKE/MODEL: 1975 White 4000
ENGINE: Detroit 8V71NA
POWER: 318hp(237kW) / 800lb/ft@1600rpm
TRANSMISSION: 15-speed Eaton Overdrive
FINAL DRIVE: 4.1:1
GCM: 42,500kg

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“How things have changed in the space of just four decades”

of a truck like this and watching the scenery slide by. You are driving it, all the time.

It's an insight into what the job entailed back then. Load 'er up, tarp it and get moving. The night is a diesel soundtrack, complimented by squawking AM CB radios and the flashing of festoon clearance lights.

WHITE OUT

Telegraphed intentions are displayed to others by an intricate code of flashing headlights and indicators. Roadhouses now long gone, serving comfort food for the road weary, and tall stories that are told of a time before sterile fluorescent lit eateries. It's all become the stuff of myth and legend.

Forty years after the birth of Trev's 'Big Red Noisy Shit Bucket', the White brand is no more.

This White, however, is a direct ancestor of the current Western Star range. These days the Detroit brand lives on, though, and is now the technology arm of Daimler's North American business.

The Detroit logo can now be found on engines, transmissions and even diffs and axles. In the US you can buy a Western Star with a full Detroit integrated driveline. And the brand has even moved into telematics. How things have changed in the space of just four decades.

After half an hour at the wheel of the White 4000 I felt as if I'd already driven from Melbourne to Sydney! But I want to have a closer look at just how far things have come.

So to find out we're going to go for a wander along the old Highway 31 — up Razor Back, through the Hole in the Wall and over Bendooley Hill, among other old highway landmarks.

And I'm taking Trev's White with me. Coming along for the ride we'll have a brand-new Detroit-powered Western Star 4900FX — the modern-day incarnation of the old White 4000.

So maybe things were better in the old days. We'll find out. I'm hoping to glean a bit of an insight into those days of yore. Highway 31 awaits. Let the night roll on. ■

It's as if you can hear the whole mechanical process.

I haul the clutch to the floor and grab a gear to get going. While we idle away from a standstill, I realise that I've forgotten about first gear, which is around the corner in the 15-speed 'box. I make a mental note to self.

I grab the next shift at 1600rpm, flat changing rather than using that big heavy clutch. "C'mon, get up it!" bellows Trev over the engine roar. So I give it some jandal and go for the next gear. Fail.

The 15-speed requires you to go around the corner for the fourth gear stick position, and then forward for the fifth gear stick position. I'd tried to grab fifth from third.

So I regrouped and rolled out onto the main road and channelled my inner road warrior. I buried the hoof and made a mental note of the gear pattern and we were underway. Many birds took flight. In fact, I suspect the automatic doors of the local shopping centre opened involuntarily as I shifted into overdrive at 2000rpm.

That old Detroit note was on-song as we thundered down the back roads. Funnily enough, it seems as if the bulk of the engine noise is coming from the engine itself rather than the exhaust stacks.

At 2000rpm, it sounds as if the 871NA is trying to suck that big red bonnet down its gullet in an insatiable mechanical frenzy for air and fuel.

Once in the zone, and up to speed with the gear pattern, I let the big red White have its head. My hands were never still on the massive steering wheel as I piloted the 4000; the left grabbing cogs when required, a decent throttle blip from the right foot required to down change.

This really was time-warp stuff as the steel-suspended rear end bucked on rough surfaces. Turning corners was a challenge in itself, as the 4000 has a power steering pump the size of a thimble. Thank God for that humungous steering wheel. The steering lock itself is the stuff of prawn trawlers.

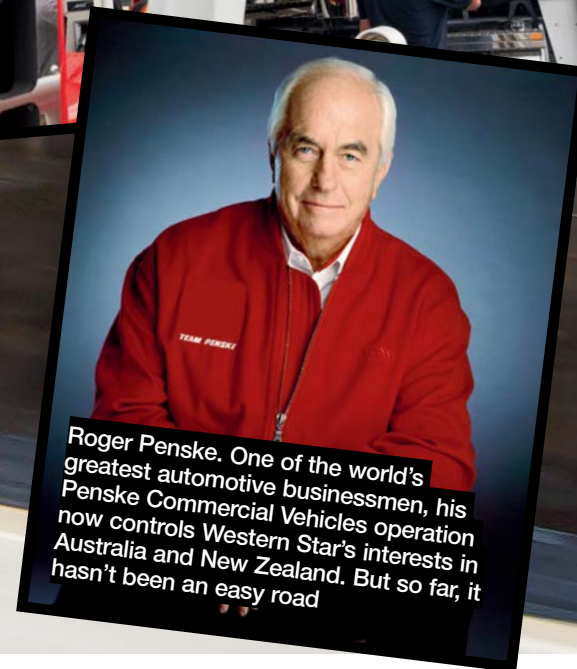
FOOT PLANTED

I try and imagine what it would be like to be running through the night on an old and winding road in a truck like this. Those old timers must've had balls of steel.

Even without a load on I'm using all the gears, the exception being not using the reduction splitter in bottom 'box.

The Detroit has virtually no torque, just 800ft-lb at 1600rpm. No wonder Trev keeps yelling at me from the passenger seat to keep the right foot planted. He then giggles like a lunatic. He's clearly having as much fun as me.

There's no question of just sitting behind the wheel



STAR TURN

*There's nothing like putting two trucks head-to-head to judge the differences, but when those trucks are 40 years apart and share the same ancestral threads, time travel takes on a whole new meaning. In this far-reaching report, **Steve Brooks** reflects on the fascinating evolution of Western Star from the ashes of White*



SURE, I have a soft spot for old bangers, the heroes of yesteryear. I guess most truck nuts do! There is, after all, nothing like a trip down memory lane to recall the path to the present to gauge where we've been, how far we've come, and in the process gather the fertiliser for stories of great deeds done.

Besides, personally and professionally I owe a great deal to the past and to the men who taught me the right way to treat a truck and the inestimable value of a soft touch on a heavy machine. In my experience there have been several such people, the standout being a hall-of-famer named Don McGlinchie. That, however, is a yarn for another day.

Even so, I don't mind admitting my real soft spots nowadays are for the trappings of more modern machines with spacious cabs and splendid seats, bigger bunks, cosy air-con, friendly steering, softer ride, mirrors and windows that

move by the flick of a button. And, thanks to the march of technology, I'm actually starting to prefer gearboxes unattached to a stick.

In a perfect world, my modern truck would come with a disabled parking sticker for reserved lanes at loading docks and roadhouses. (Pardon me, I need to duck into the bathroom again.)

The same goes for trailers. I still know how to tie a rope, and I'm reasonably sure I haven't completely forgotten how to roll and tie a tarp with some degree of visual respectability. But that said, give me a curtain-sider any day, especially one like the Freightor drop-deck trailer equipped with the sensational Auto-Hold system hooked to the Western Star 4964 model in this story.

The thing is, I reckon the life of a long distance truck driver probably hasn't changed much at all. It's still long hours and short shift. What has changed are the

standards of drivers and trucks, with the latter compensating more and more for the former.

So the way I see it, the past is where it belongs and should only be brought out for special occasions ... like vintage truck shows and giving Matt Wood an excuse to satisfy a spiritual sojourn into the myths of time. Or, as some suggest, a time when real men drove real trucks, not today's big sooks with all their quiet comforts, pretentious power, erudite efficiency, and gaggle of gadgets. And, dare I say it, greater reliability.

Nah, none of this soft stuff for Woody. At least, not on this occasion. He wanted the smell, the sound, the romance of yesteryear. History in the roar, so to speak. A man's truck, where gearshifts are an art, steering builds biceps, comfort is a concept, and the dark haze of unburned fuel belching from twin sooters is the stuff of legend and lore.

And over a few days on the old Hume Highway he got it all at the helm of Trevor Ellwood's lovingly restored White 4000. Forty years young, a two-stroke screamin' demon under the snout, the trickery of a 15-speed overdrive box, all the torque of a yo-yo, the turning circle of a Sydney ferry, and a claustrophobic box for a bunk. Folklore at its finest on a strip of road fully deserving of its Sesame Street sobriquet.

Yet to his immeasurable credit, Matt conquered it all with skill, dedication, calm civility and sweaty palms. He had visited the past and emerged proud and pumped. A changed man. Until ...

After about three days, dullness in his eyes, left arm hanging like limp rope, a wistful and somewhat subdued Woody walked up beside the Western Star, indicated with the twitch of a finger for the window to be lowered, looked longingly up to the driver's door and

asked gently over the smooth hum of the 15 litre Detroit, "Hey mate, how about I drive the Star for a while?"

I looked down at the despairing figure, compassion and charity momentarily melding in mutual respect. "Nah, no chance!" Poor thing. Not happy, man!

Anyway, as he skulked back to the past in a cloud of verbal invective, it struck me that while the sentimental heart of this exercise was indeed the old White and Woody's long-held quest for a hands-on history lesson, the truly inspiring story is actually Western Star.

After all, White is long dead, and if not for a few fateful interventions many years ago, Western Star would have followed the same path to extinction.

The Western Star story is, in fact, a little like road transport itself; a chronicle of survival and success despite the odds. It is only through a cold, hard look at people and events of the past that an accurate record of Star's evolution becomes appreciably clear.

TO THE MAX

These days, of course, Western Star is a high-profile player on the Australian market and the reasons for that prominence are blatantly obvious in models such as the superbly presented 4964 FXT model provided for this pounce into the past and present.

The bulk of the credit for the truck's excellent presentation belongs to Penske Commercial Vehicles' marketing

operative and loyal Western Star advocate, Pat Cook. In typical 'Cookie' fashion, there was nothing left to chance and, more to the point, lots to like. It was, to put it mildly, spec'd to the max.

Meantime, only those living in a cave atop a Mongolian mountain would be ignorant of the fact that the key to the 'star chamber' is these days held by automotive icon and billionaire businessman Roger Penske, operating under the Penske Commercial Vehicles title. Following much speculation, it was Penske who in 2013 acquired the Australia and New Zealand operations of Transpacific's commercial vehicle group — Western Star trucks, MAN trucks and buses and Dennis Eagle trucks — for a reported \$219 million.

Since then, the redoubtable Mr Penske has also moved into the truck rental business and taken control of Detroit Diesel interests in Australia and New Zealand, renaming the engine entity Penske Power Systems.

This is, of course, the same Roger Penske who in 1988 took control of Detroit Diesel from General Motors and, with the then revolutionary Series 60 as the launch pad, masterminded the engine brand's spectacular rise to market might and profound profits before selling to Daimler little more than a decade later.

We'll get to a tad more detail on Penske's involvement in Western Star a little later, but for now it shouldn't surprise anyone that the power under this

Star came from a 14.8-litre Detroit DD15 EGR engine dispensing a healthy 560hp (418kW) at 1800 rpm and 1850ft-lb of torque at 1200 revs.

At this point, it's worth pointing out that the lively Detroit actually dispenses 585hp (436kW) at the same engine speed as peak torque, which suggests, of course, that a high level of tenacity comes on stream as revs slide back through the range. On this occasion though, hauling an empty trailer for the entirety of the exercise, the outfit didn't even come close to raising a sweat.

Whatever, you don't need a loaded trailer to appreciate the finer features of a truck. It had, for instance, been a few years since I'd last been inside Star's Stratosphere sleeper. In the space and comfort of this 54-inch version, it took no time at all to realise why it remains widely regarded as one of the best bunks in the business for long distance work.

Likewise, the overall fit and finish was nothing short of outstanding, while road manners and steering quality were second to none. With Eaton's Ultrashift-Plus automated 18-speeder taking care of shift duties, it was simply a case of sit back and enjoy the ride. Literally!

Still, there were some aspects of this unit that personally smacked of overkill. A broad array of multimedia and telematics wizardry may appeal to some tastes, yet demand a vast amount of system familiarity. As for a push button start/stop function, why create more

electronic complexity when turning a key is hardly a physically compromising effort? In effect, where's the benefit?

Benefits were at least apparent with external cameras at the back of the cab for hooking up, another at the front to sight objects hidden by the expansive hood, and blind spot cameras fixed to each side of the hood, all viewed on a screen mounted on top of the dash.

CHANGING FORTUNES

No doubt about it, Western Star has sure come a long way since the brand was created in 1967 as the Canadian offshoot of the White Motor Corporation. It was a clever move by White. Even back then, Canadian truckers ran bigger and heavier than their US counterparts, and with the obvious intention of capitalising on Canada's burgeoning mining and construction tasks, White built a dedicated Western Star factory in Kelowna, British Columbia. It wasn't big by US standards, but it was big enough to service a Canadian market eager for a tougher truck than those from factories below the border.

For a decade and more, everything ran along smoothly, with Star recognised as Canada's own truck, taking the lion's share of sales in the heavy end of the business and building a reputation for dependability and strength.

South of the border, however, the news was increasingly bleak. White was sliding deep into an economic abyss from

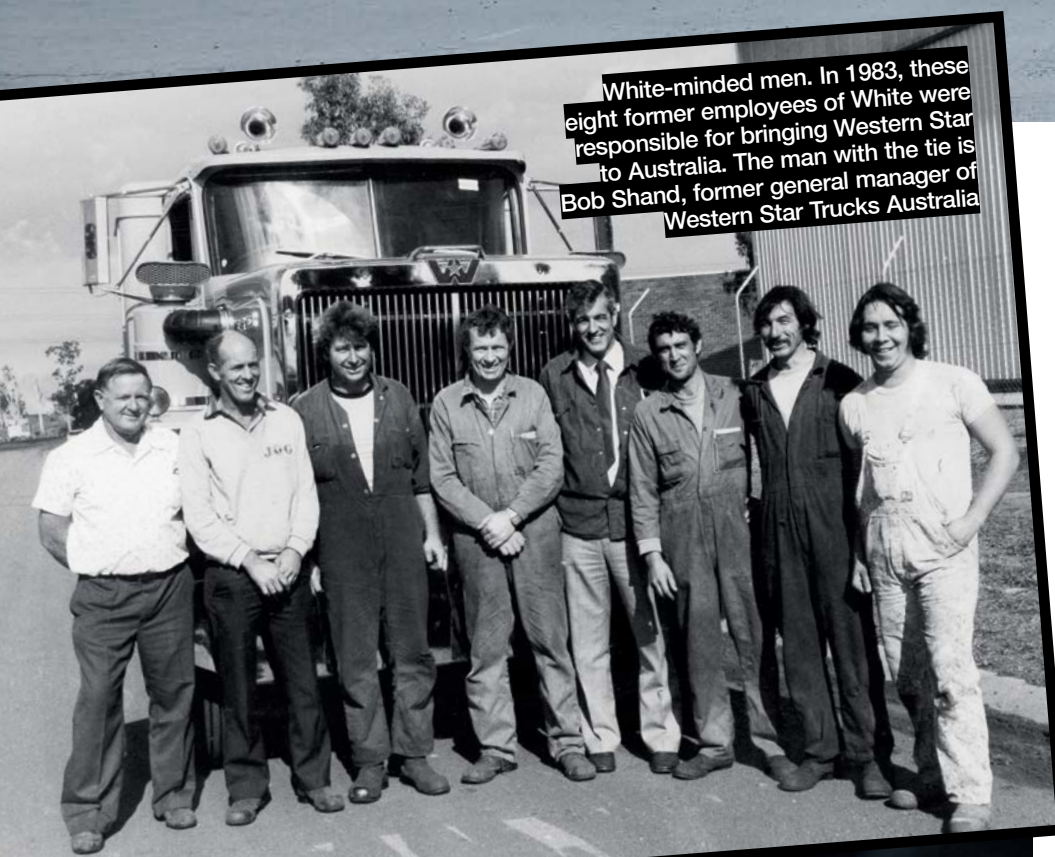
OWNER DRIVER

MAKE/MODEL: 1975 White 4000
ENGINE: Detroit 8V71NA
TRANSMISSION: 15-speed Eaton Overdrive
POWER: 318hp (237kW)/800ft-lb (1085Nm) at 1600rpm
FINAL DRIVE: 4.1:1
GCM: 42,500kg

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Head to head. Truck driving is still long hours and short shifts, but at least trucks and trailers have come a long, long way in the 40 years separating the latest Western Star 4964 FXT from Trevor Ellwood's 1975 White 4000



White-minded men. In 1983, these eight former employees of White were responsible for bringing Western Star to Australia. The man with the tie is Bob Shand, former general manager of Western Star Trucks Australia



On the inside. There was plenty to like and it was a case of just sit back and enjoy the ride. Ultrashift-Plus automated transmission makes life easy, but position of dash-mounted control panel didn't inspire. Still, Stratosphere sleeper remains one of the best in the business

which there would be no escape, and by 1980 the once proud and prosperous White Motor Corporation was acquired by Volvo. It was a huge gain for the Swedes; an entrée into the vast North American market. It was a death sentence for White.

Of course, the news wasn't great for White in Australia either, and despite the brand's solid reputation forged by conventional models such as the 4000, 9000 and ultimately the hugely popular Road Boss, Volvo had nil interest in the Australian operation.

Some Brisbane-based people tried valiantly to keep the brand afloat in Australia but ultimately, White slid quickly into oblivion here as well as the US. Others, however, had other ideas, but we'll get to that in a moment.

RESCUE OPERATION

Back in North America, Western Star held no appeal for Volvo, and effectively stripped of funds, the Canadian operation was suddenly stranded with decidedly dim prospects.

Until, that is, a couple of Canadian resource companies — Bow Valley Resources and Nova-Alberta — saw potential in the brand and took control.

The truck manufacturing business was, however, far outside their realms of expertise, and over ensuing years Western Star's extinction was again looking likely despite the Canadian Government's efforts to find a buyer and protect jobs at the Kelowna factory.

Meantime, a group of eight former White workers in Brisbane firmly believed Western Star was a path to a new future founded on the reputation of trucks like Road Boss.

So, in 1983, this collection of White-minded men formed Western Star Trucks

Australia with the determined objective of assembling Stars from kits imported from Kelowna, putting the trucks together in the same Wacol facility which even today remains home to Western Star's Australian operation.

Still, it was a slow start. Very slow. The Australian market for heavy-duty trucks was down, competition was typically fierce, and as a completely new name in the game, Western Star struggled for business despite its White heritage. However, the seeds had been sown and as time would reveal, survival was the first step to ultimate success.

In Western Star's case, the key to both — survival and success — came to lay in the hands of Brisbane-based business magnate and Transpacific founder Terry Peabody. A fierce businessman with a reputation for brutal dealings, Peabody was an early supporter and eventual owner of the Western Star venture in Australia. Like or loathe him, he would ultimately become the brand's saviour both here and in Canada.

By the early '90s, Western Star's Canadian operation was in dire straits. No doubt keen to protect his Australian investment, Peabody pounced with split second timing on the eve of total collapse to buy the Western Star business in its entirety at what was reputed to be a bargain basement price. Indeed, word has it the Canadian Government and Peabody each contributed \$10 million to save the business, with Peabody taking full ownership and quickly recouping his outlay in operating income. Critically, the deal also came with guarantees of support from the Canadian Government.

From here on, Western Star was on a roll, and by 1992 the Australian operation was being gradually replaced by fully imported trucks built with

appreciation for the Australian market. Surprising to some, Peabody revealed a detailed understanding and intense passion for truck manufacturing, turning the entire Western Star operation — and particularly the Kelowna manufacturing plant — into an incredibly efficient and profitable entity.

Importantly, research and development investment were high on Peabody's agenda, leading to the 1998 debut of the much-applauded Constellation cab, and later the first of the Stratosphere sleepers. Most importantly, he saw product quality and production efficiency as keys to the brand's viability in North America and vital export markets such as Australia.

So whether he's revered or reviled, there's no doubt that Peabody's skill at

not just saving Western Star as a custom-builder, but making it an entirely viable business was a phenomenal feat.

Even so, Western Star's Peabody era wasn't without its wobbly bits, the most obvious being a couple of failed attempts in the early-to-mid '90s to cash in on the local demand for B-double cab-overs.

Utilising his short-lived relationships with DAF and later ERF, locally developed models known as the Western Star 1064 Series (DAF) and Western Star Commander 7564 (ERF) came and went without much more than a ripple of interest. To some, including me, they were an insult to the brand.

There is, however, an interesting twist to this part of the story. The long-

established British builder ERF was actually bought by Peabody's Western Star and later sold off to German maker MAN, which may go some way to explaining how MAN became part of Transpacific's commercial vehicle group and now Penske Commercial Vehicles.

SMART SALE

Behind the scenes though, far bigger business was brewing. Peabody is a businessman first and foremost, and with the century drawing to a close, rumours circulated that Freightliner's enigmatic US chief Jim Hebe had Western Star on his shopping list.

In an exclusive interview in his Kelowna office late in 1998, Peabody told me that yes, he had discussed the sale of Western Star to Freightliner, but right at that moment, Hebe had not come up with the right money.

Without too much surprise, given Hebe's seemingly insatiable appetite for acquisitions, the right money arrived (a cool US\$690 million) in September 2000, and from that point, Western Star was part of Daimler's ballooning North American empire.

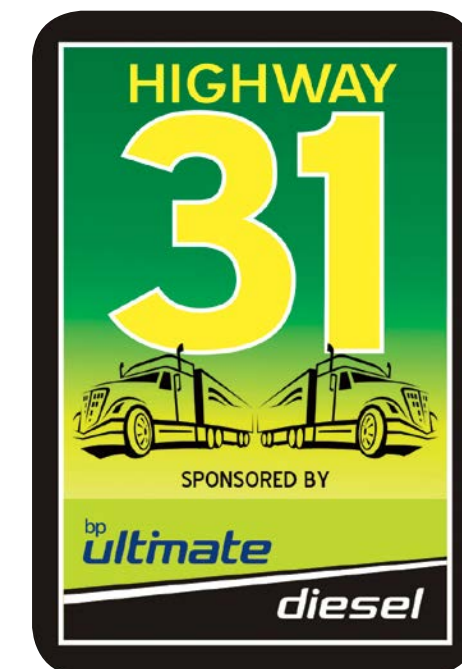
There was, however, one addendum to the deal that still shocks some Daimler executives: Peabody was allowed to refund a relatively small percentage of the purchase price — said to be between five and 10 per cent — to keep control of the Australian and New Zealand operations of Western Star. From any angle it was a ridiculous

decision by Daimler, effectively making Star a competitor of Freightliner in Australia. The only one laughing was Peabody, all the way to the bank.

That aside, Daimler didn't waste any time rationalising Western Star's North American operation. Foremost on the hit list was the Kelowna factory. This remarkably efficient facility had been the brand's body and soul since the late '60s, but was abandoned in favour of an existing plant at Freightliner's home base in Portland, Oregon.

From here on, the Western Star story settles into chapters characterised by stability and steady growth, with the Australian market continuing to play a

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OWNER DRIVER

MAKE/MODEL: Western Star 4964FXT
ENGINE: DD15 EGR 14.8-litre displacement
OUTPUTS: Power 560hp (418kW) at 1800rpm. Torque 1850ft-lb (2508Nm) at 1200 rpm
TRANSMISSION: Eaton Fuller 18-speed overdrive Ultrashift-Plus automated with hill start aid and auto traction control
REAR AXLE: Meritor RT46-160GP drive tandem; 4.3:1 final drive ratio
FRONT AXLE: Meritor MFS-16-122A; capacity 7.25 tonnes (16,000lb)
REAR SUSPENSION: Airliner airbag 20.8 tonnes (46,000lb) capacity
FRONT SUSPENSION: Meritor taper-leaf 7.25 tonnes (16,000lb) capacity
SLEEPER: Western Star Stratosphere 54-inch hi-rise
FUEL: Four x 473-litre round aluminium tanks

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"The Western Star story is ... a little like road transport itself"



Smokin! Roarin' up Razorback with twin sooters steamin', Trevor Ellwood's nicely restored White 4000 is a flashback to days long gone in more ways than one



It's not just trucks that have come a long way. The trailer world has also undergone major developments, typified perhaps by this Freightliner drop-deck with the innovative Auto-Hold system



"We really needed Australia then. Big time!"



Terry Peabody. Tough businessman who not only saved Western Star from extinction, but built it into a world-class custom-builder. Without his involvement, Western Star would today be like White ... dead!

critical role in the brand's success.

Yet with Freightliner as the flagship of Daimler's conventional truck range, and the subsequent creation of the Sterling brand after Daimler's purchase of Ford's heavy truck business, it was easy to form the sceptical view that Western Star was becoming a poor cousin. That view, was smashed in late 2008 when Sterling was dumped from Daimler's armoury and Western Star retained.

Again, the Australian market was a significant factor in Western Star's continuing status as a respected custom-builder within Daimler. As one senior manager at the Portland plant told me in late 2012, "We have become very good at right hand-drive, and there have been times when it has been critical to the workload of this factory." Never more than during the Global Financial Crisis of 2007 and 2008 when, "We really needed Australia then. Big time!"

NEW ERA

Even so, from around 2010 onwards, things started to change dramatically at Western Star Trucks Australia. Peabody

was losing his grip on control of Transpacific and likewise, the commercial vehicle group that had Western Star as its main attraction. Sure, he remains a major Transpacific shareholder, but these days has no operational or management input.

Fortunately, he had at least gathered a highly professional and dedicated team to guide Western Star and its MAN and Dennis Eagle stablemates. The thing is, Transpacific is fundamentally a resources and waste management conglomerate, so without Peabody's hands-on passion and power to keep the commercial vehicle group within Transpacific's domain, the truck business became increasingly foreign to the company's core activities. Enter Roger Penske!

On July 29, 2013, it was announced that the Penske Automotive Group would acquire Transpacific's commercial vehicle group (CVG). As mentioned, rumours of Penske's interest had been rife for some time, but there was also speculation that Peabody, a billionaire buddy of Penske's, was a silent partner in the deal.

The only way to find out for sure was to go to the man himself, and it was an emphatic Peabody who denied any

financial involvement in the purchase, though he did confirm that he and Penske had discussed the deal long before the July 29 announcement.

"Roger did discuss with me his plans for the acquisition but I have no financial interest," Peabody told me in a phone conversation soon after the Penske announcement. "Yes, I did consider it [having a stake in the deal], but Roger has his own agenda which I believe will be very good for the group."

Retaining a strong attachment to the brand (understandable given his achievements with Western Star), Peabody strongly endorsed the Penske purchase: "Roger Penske is one of the most accomplished business people I know and I'm very pleased this transaction has taken place. It puts Western Star in great hands."

However, whereas Peabody's timing in acquiring Western Star in 1991 had been pinpoint perfect, Penske's timing appears to have been the exact opposite, as a number of factors conspired to make life extremely tough for Penske Commercial Vehicles.

The biggest hit of all was the Aussie dollar's heavy drop in value against the US greenback, taking the gloss off a Star, which in sales terms had been shining particularly bright over the previous few years. Suddenly, costs exploded and margins imploded, and it has largely been that way ever since. The stats tell the story loud and clear.

In 2012, Western Star finished the year with strong sales of more than 1000 trucks and a heavy-duty market share of 8.8 per cent. In 2013, the year Penske moved in, a respectable 950 trucks were

sold for a market take of 8.5 per cent. The next year, 658 Western Stars were sold for a mediocre slice of 6.1 per cent of the heavy-duty sector. It was noticeably worse last year, with just 501 sales at a modest 5.1 per cent share.

Unfortunately, 2016 is shaping up as a poor year for heavy-duty truck sales, and at the end of the first quarter just 102 Western Stars had been delivered, annualising to a tad over 400 sales for the year; figures that must rankle a man famous for fiscal acumen.

Still, only a supreme pessimist or someone with no knowledge of Penske's amazing record of success in a multitude of automotive and business endeavours would dare suggest that Western Star's Australian operation is in dire straits.

It begs the question though, what can Penske do to slow the slide? It's a critical question for Penske Commercial Vehicles and, make no mistake, the response will have ramifications all the way to Portland, Oregon.

Unfortunately, Mr Penske has been elusive since the acquisition despite numerous trips to Australia and several requests for interviews. Hopefully an upcoming visit will provide the chance for at least a couple of questions.

In the meantime, there can be no question Penske has very serious intentions for the Australian market and equally, Western Star will play a vital part in the Penske agenda ... whatever the ultimate goal of that agenda may be.

For now, the next chapter in the Star story is still being crafted and as always, time will tell. The only certainty is that today's events will soon enough be tomorrow's past. ■



DOING THE TIME WARP

The trucks have been parked and the comparisons have been made. **Matt Wood** reflects on his drive down the old Hume Highway and his journey into yesteryear



LIKE MANY who've been bitten by the trucking bug, my infatuation with heavy haulers started early. I blame Weet Bix, actually.

In the early 1980s, cereal company Sanitarium was putting truck swap cards in cereal packets. Every new box was eagerly ripped open at the wrong end in a mad scramble to find the latest card featuring a Kenworth, Mack, White, International, or, if you were unlucky, a Bedford. This will no doubt only serve to confirm suspicions amongst some that I really did get my truck licence from a cereal packet.

It was, in many ways, a golden age for the image of trucking. The movie *Convoy* and its soundtrack had been

a pop culture hit. CB radios were widespread and operated like a primitive version of the internet. Burt Reynolds ran with the stereotype in the *Smokey and the Bandit* movies, and who could forget the rather bizarre concept of a truck driver and his pet chimpanzee in the TV series *BJ and the Bear*.

Wide open roads and the truck driver riding on the edge of society had romance and allure. The driver was a resourceful hero.

So, with my freckled nose pressed against the side windows of the family wagon, I gazed at the road-going behemoths looming out of the dark on long country trips, fascinated by the sight and sound.

A couple of decades later, it was me behind the wheel. By then, trucks and trucking had already evolved into very different beasts. With the exception of a couple of Internationals, early in my career, virtually all of the heavy haulers I drove professionally used electronically controlled engine management by the time I was being paid to make a mile.

GOOD OLD DAYS?

Loading dock and roadhouse yarns spoke of a mythological time when trucks were tough, drivers were tougher, and trucking was a respected part of the national economy. The general consensus always seemed to be that trucking was so much better back in the '70s and '80s.

Had I missed out on the boom times in transport? Or was it just the sepia-toned reminiscence of a faded youth that I was hearing?

Just how far have trucks and the job evolved over the last four decades? I thought I'd attempt to visit those times and perhaps gain an insight into what trucking was like back in the 1970s.

The Western Star brand emerged from the ashes of the White Motor Company. As White drifted towards insolvency in the late 1970s, Volvo stepped in and bought the ailing truck maker to gain a foothold in the US market.

White disappeared from view, leaving Western Star and Autocar as the remaining legacies of the once sizeable



Time for a bit of reflection at the top of Razorback

White truck stable. And that's where the 1975 White 4000 belonging to Trevor Ellwood comes in: the result of a lot of pride, passion and hard work over a two-and-a-half-year resto. It's a trucking time warp from another era, and it was the perfect vehicle to visit the past in.

The White uses a GM Detroit 8V71NA for power, all of 318 horses in fact. And the 9.0-litre, two-stroke V8 works very hard indeed to create a mere 800ft-lb of torque. That power is delivered in a rev hungry frenzy that has the supercharger screaming to pound as much fuel and as much atmosphere as it can ram down its throat with every turn of the fly wheel.

A 15-speed overdrive 'box handles gear changing duties. It's a truck that demands commitment to drive.

To mirror my look down the highways of yesteryear, I thought it would be useful to also look to the present in the shape of a Western Star 4900. This truck

is the direct ancestor of the White 4000, the modern day incarnation of the White.

And behind those traditional looks, this gleaming prime mover has also been loaded up with the latest in gizmos available from the Penske stable.

MODERN TECHNOLOGY

Behind the gleaming King Bars bull bar is a 560hp Detroit DD15, and behind that is an 18-speed Eaton UltraShift-Plus automated transmission.

This 'Star also features a four camera blind spot display, electronic stability control, keyless entry and push button start. Though, funnily enough, the old White also features push button start!

A massive walkthrough Stratosphere Starlight sleeper adds some acreage to the cab area, which also features a leather-clad driver's and passenger seat. Liberal doses of chrome and stainless round out the package, along

with some custom pipes. It's a bloody nice looking rig.

So, while I roll along reminiscing about where trucking has come from, this 4900 represents the present and future of North American truck technology.

I didn't get to spend much time behind the wheel, but I will say that it does take a little while to adjust to the keyless entry and push button starter. Once the Detroit fired up, there was a noticeable bark from the flash looking 'Star through the custom slash back pipes.

Every prime mover needs a trailer, so in keeping with the theme of modernity, we got our hands on the latest auto hold, auto curtain, auto mez deck drop deck trailer from Freighter.

GM to DD15, tarps and ropes to automatic curtains, manual gearboxes to automated ones: so much has changed in trucking technology over four decades.

There's an old-school cool about the

old V8 White, but it's hard to ignore the new-age trucking statement made by Western Star with this 4900. Crawl through sleeper vs walk through; manual vs auto; horsepower vs rpm.

THE OLD HUME

The asphalt arterial that is the Hume Highway has evolved into a divided freeway. Before that, Highway 31 wound through the towns and villages dotting regional New South Wales and Victoria. Every corner and climb had a name in trucking parlance.

GM Detroit, VT Cummins, Caterpillar all provided a raucous soundtrack to the frantic pace of heavy traffic along what many still call 'Sesame Street' — a high-speed rollicking ride where happy hour was an explosion of sight and sound.

But were trucks really better back then? Before the advent of big horsepower and B-doubles?



Engine bays have certainly become a lot more complex

Many parts of the old Hume Highway remain, though now it's a tourist drive through Picton, Bargo, Mittagong and Berrima. Other parts are on private land now. I figured it may be an idea to take Trev's old White for a drive over Razorback and along the old Hume.

And again, I asked Steve Brooks to come along for the drive. Steve reckons the past belongs in the past. So he got the keys to the new Western Star.

I climbed aboard the White, complete with a period correct spread tri-axle flat top trailer, plus gates, plus tarp.

There's just something about hitting the starter button on an old GM. You can't help but grin when the V8 explodes into life. It's the raw ingredients of diesel combustion writ large.

AIR-CON BEREFT

As Steve motored up the Razorback range with the air-con cranked, I had both windows down and a gear shift permanently welded to my sweaty palm. In an old truck like this, you are never still. With one ear on the exhaust note, you're either about to change up a gear or down a gear depending on topography; the tachometer is just about superfluous, it's pretty much a case of hold it flat. That massive steering wheel is never still, either!

The ear-splitting roar of the Detroit

couldn't help but bring a smile to my face. As I drove, my brain had finally accepted the 'around the corner and back to front' gear pattern of the 15 overdrive transmission — 'down a cog, up a cog, down a cog, repeat'.

Given the passion around the RSRT debate recently, it seemed appropriate to pause at top of the Razorback Range and recall a time when owner-drivers made a stand and won. These days it's hard to picture this road clogged with stationary trucks, their owners demanding the repeal of road tax.

Rolling towards Picton, I hit the Jake switch as I came off the range. The resulting cacophony was akin to the sound of a low-flying Lancaster bomber and a Gatling gun spitting lead.

A liquid cooled industrial roar of defiance raging in the face of progress — and I was still grinning.

I let the GM bog down a little as I swung through the famous Hole in the Wall at Picton.

A quick blip of the throttle and a down change had that Detroit note reverberating off the bluestone viaduct; a cloud of fuel smoke erupted from the stacks, marking my passage. Steve wasn't far behind me in the Star. I hoped he had his windows up and his vents closed!

The Bargo Pie shop used to be a

24-hour road house back in the '70s. Today, there's a house sitting on the block where the truck parking area was. It's hard to imagine any truck of today's dimensions fitting under the old awning where the pumps used to be.

I tried to picture this place in the dark with big engines clattering and festoon lights glowing through the dust clouds raised by dumped maxi brakes. Now it's a good place to grab a pie on a Sunday afternoon drive.

SMOG MACHINE

Parking both trucks nose-to-nose highlighted the progress in truck technology over the last 40 years. The family resemblance remains, but the Western Star looms over its ancestor. A comparatively massive engine needs a big cooling package, and it also needs to get rid of all of the heat that 15 litres can generate. The cab sits higher off the chassis, the bonnet sits taller, and the wheelbase is longer.

This 4900 is good for applications up to 106 tonnes, and can handle a number of today's multi trailer combinations. The 4000 was always going to be a single trailer proposition on the east coast. The old GM has the capability to block out the sun with its emissions, the DD15 EGR in comparison runs squeaky clean.



MAKE/MODEL: Western Star 4964FXT
ENGINE: DD15 EGR 14.8-litre displacement
OUTPUTS: Power 560hp at 1800rpm. Torque 1850ft-lb at 1200 rpm
TRANSMISSION: Eaton Fuller 18-speed overdrive Ultrashift-Plus automated with hill start aid and auto traction control
REAR AXLE: Meritor RT46-160GP drive tandem; 4.3:1 final drive ratio
FRONT AXLE: Meritor MFS-16-122A; capacity 7.25 tonnes (16,000lb)
REAR SUSPENSION: Airliner airbag 20.8 tonnes (46,000lb) capacity
FRONT SUSPENSION: Meritor taper-leaf 7.25 tonnes (16,000lb) capacity
SLEEPER: Western Star Stratosphere 54 inch hi-rise
FUEL: Four x 473-litre round aluminium tanks
WHEELS: Alcoa 10-stud aluminium discs
TYRES: Front — Michelin Multiway XZE 295/80R 22.5; Rear — Michelin Multiway D 11R22.5

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Our 4900FXT had DD15 Detroit under the bonnet and was backed by an Eaton UltraShift-Plus AMT





It didn't take me long to find out what the switch labelled 'Jacobs' did ... it made lots of noise

Climbing Bendooley Hill behind the wheel of the White before roaring into Berrima saw me constantly swinging the wheel of the 4000 over the broken road surface. Yes, I was still smiling, but it hammered home just how big the job description was back then. This road was no place for amateurs.

I could keep pointing out the endless examples of how much trucks have changed over four decades. There's no doubt that the modern heavy duty truck is safer, more comfortable, more fuel efficient, cleaner, and more reliable.

But I think the real reason for the nostalgia surrounding the past has more to do with the modern image of trucking

and perceptions of truck drivers rather than the trucks themselves. Trev's White is from a time when transport was valued rather than barely tolerated.

Consumerism continues to accelerate, yet there's a general disdain for the supply chain and Australia's dependence on road transport. We want our goods, we just don't want to be reminded of the ugly task of delivering them.

The folk hero image of the long-haul truck driver has long faded. The job, however, still entails long and arduous hours away from home.

Tautliners may have replaced tarp loads, and load binders have replaced ropes — yet, for the most part, the job

is now safer. We have safer loading procedures and safer trucks, yet at the same time there seems to be less pride in the job.

BUMS ON SEATS

A labour shortage in transport now sees many employers in a daily battle to get bums on seats in a hurry. The job has become easier to compensate for a dwindling skill set. Many employee drivers I've spoken to feel as if they've lost some ownership of the job.

It doesn't matter how well you tie a rope or stretch out a tarp, or whether you know a dog from a chain. And it doesn't even really matter how good

you are at reversing a trailer or two. Just get it there, safely.

That said, that gleaming new 4900FXT couldn't help but fire some imagination as it sat in all its blinged-up glory.

It's a commanding, conventional statement that speaks of long haul highways and dusty horizons. A heavy-duty heritage carved out of the Canadian forests and the Pacific north-west.

However, it's old trucks like Trevor Ellwood's White 4000 that remind us of a time when a Weet Bix-eating, freckle nosed kid would give a truck driver a big thumbs up out the window of the family station wagon, and get a blast of the air horns in return. ■

Powering through the hole in the wall at Picton. Flashback time!

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MAKE/MODEL: 1975 White 4000
ENGINE: Detroit 8V71NA
TRANSMISSION: 15-speed Eaton Overdrive
POWER: 318hp/800ft-lb @ 1600rpm
FINAL DRIVE: 4.1:1
GCM: 42,500kg

FOR THE FULL SPECS VISIT
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