A brief history of Pandora's Box

The genesis of this project can be traced back to 1987 when attending a GRINZ[1] Basic Course in New Zealand genealogy run by Heather Webber-Aitu. In response to the challenge to get information organised an index to individuals was an obvious beginning. By the following year 'the index' contained approximately 5,000 entries covering the extended family tree.

This was initially stored on a British Acorn Electron computer then re-keyed into the DOS system on an IBM AT 286 machine with a monochrome monitor. John Hand of the Wellington branch of the New Zealand Society of Genealogists generously shared his extensive knowledge of text editors and databases. This was invaluable with regard to speeding up data entry and for moving the information from one database program to another over time. In addition he allowed me to combine 'the index' with his transcribed list of 1908 school teachers.

An introduction to Official Publications came via Linda Cocks, a member of the Hutt Branch of the New Zealand Society of Genealogists. Her experience from working at National Archives combined with genealogical research resulted in some excellent 'finds' in the Appendices to the Journal of the House of Representatives (AJHR) and the New Zealand Gazette. Linda provided the first AJHR list to be added to 'the index' and this was "Officers ceased to be in Government Service since 30 June 1865." Railway employees of the 1890s were next and by October 1991 'the index' had grown to 35,000 entries. In February 1992, after discussion with Linda about the nature of all these indexes within an index, it was decided to call 'the index' Pandora's Box. This was based on the idea that you couldn't predict what you might find.

Also in 1992 three speakers at the Wellington and Hutt branch meetings led to learning about more lists worthy of indexing. Ken Scadden's talk about maritime history led to the indexing of shipwreck inquiries, masters, mates and engineers. Bob Sykes from the Trademark Library led to the indexing of patents and trademarks. Rollo Arnold talked about Lambton Quay fires and in doing so mentioned the existence of monthly lists of fires from 1878 for Australia, NZ and the Pacific Islands published in the Australasian Insurance and Banking Record.

From about mid 1993 work switched to the New Zealand Gazettes – the years 1857 and 1863 were completely indexed. This was followed by land transfer notices, gold mining company shareholders, nurses, teachers etc. Also about this time a series of articles written by Denis Hampton about the AJHRs were published in the New Zealand Genealogist.This in turn led to the indexing of all the references listed in "Part Eleven – Land." Indexing of AJHR and NZ Gazettes lists continued until early 1997.

Pandora's Box, with ~472,000 entries was then gifted to the NZ Society of Genealogists. After discussions with Paul Alpe it was mutually agreed that 380,000 entries were suitable for the "NZSG Index". The two main indexes omitted were members interest's from the New Zealand Genealogist (~70,000) and references to the lists of fires in the Australasian Insurance and Banking record (~20,000). Neither of these indexes had full forenames. Also the latter is not readily available via main public libraries. A complete run (1877-1973) is held at Victoria University of Wellington in offsite storage.

[1] Genealogical Research of New Zealand

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