

**50 YEARS
YOUNG**

KATE TAYLOR

50 YEARS YOUNG

A HISTORY OF THE
YOUNG FARMER OF THE YEAR



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To Betty and the late John Ellis of Tikokino in Central Hawke's Bay. John and Betty attended almost every contest grand final, even though John never competed because he aged out of Young Farmers two years before it started. He loved the energy, innovation and determination of 'those young ones'. It didn't matter where in the country the grand final was, Betty and John would combine it with other visits, even timing overseas travel so they didn't miss it (although they had to once or twice). It was a great way to see the country and they were excellent travellers. John missed the 2018 grand final as he was at a family funeral. He died two weeks later. RIP Mr Ellis.

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FOREWORD

There are two constants in this history of the Young Farmer of the Year competition. The first is change. The faces change. The places change. The sponsors change. The physical skills, the breadth of the questions, and a multitude of devious ways of tripping up contestants all change. Lives have been changed by winning. And, perhaps most significantly, over the 50 years the competition has been running the very notion of what it means to be a farmer has changed.

The second constant is what doesn't change. The passion, the tenacity, and the sheer exuberance of the 'young farmers' and all who fully embrace the competition remain the same.

What's also apparent amongst the professionalism of those involved is a deeply imbued sense of rural larrikinism. Even at the most serious moments a quick quip or a raised eyebrow reminds us that it's still meant to be fun. Fun for the supporters, the volunteers, the families, the sponsors and the audiences. Is it fun for the competitors? Possibly not at the time. But anyone on the organising committees will tell you that's the point.

And there's always something unexpected. Like the time I arrived at the 2016 Grand Final in Timaru to discover that sometime between a late afternoon rehearsal and the formal black-tie evening event, some very competent folk had erected a pen on the dance floor, and a four-stand shearing set-up on the stage. Waiting in the pen were a number of increasingly aromatic sheep. I'm not sure who was more surprised by this, me or the sheep, but it did seem like a perfect metaphor for the competition: black tie meets black singlet.

It's impossible to know what the event will be like in another 50 years. As agriculture enters a world of automation, algorithms and alternative proteins, one thing is certain: it'll still require passionate young people with a deep understanding of what it means to nurture the land, grow crops, and raise all manner of animals with whatever tools they have to hand. That will never change.

TE RADAR
OCTOBER 2018

PREFACE

I love Young Farmers with a passion — I have since I was 15. I used Young Farmers as a way to create a ready circle of like-minded mates as I moved around the country in my early years — Blue Mountain College YFC in West Otago where I grew up (as Kate Rivett), Maitland in Eastern Southland when I worked in Gore, West Melton in Canterbury when I was a student, Dunstan in Alexandra and finally Eskview in Hawke's Bay. Young Farmers has given me friendships, leadership, education, employment, fun and love — I met my husband Thomas the day I joined Eskview in 1993. I am a journalist by trade and have worked for and written for many rural organisations in the past 30 years, but none have meant as much to me as Young Farmers.

It doesn't seem like 18 years since I sat on the stage of the Dannevirke Town Hall in my one and only Young Farmer of the Year regional final in 2001. I have competed, organised, helped, judged, photographed and reported on the Young Farmer of the Year. Like many of the other people you'll read about in this book, I remember snippets of that day — such as thinking in the technical section that I should have paid more attention to my school accounting teacher, feeling absolutely bugged after the Agri-sports, and my general knowledge question: Who was the captain of the Hurricanes rugby team? Bull Allen!

Like many of the others in this book, I was thrilled not to come last. I was still breastfeeding my daughter, so overall it wasn't the most comfortable day. I was pregnant again by the time the next contest rolled around, and then I aged out of Young Farmers although I stayed involved as East Coast regional executive officer, as a member of the grand final organising committee in 1995 and 2003 and then as the grand final media liaison/photographer from 2006–13.

We might age out, but many of us never stop. I have found in my wanderings that the people who have gained most from Young Farmers and the Young Farmer of the Year are the people who have put the most in — both as members and as former members. I hope this book proves that while competitors and winners are important cogs in the contest story, so too are the volunteers and the organisers.

I have a favourite story from my journeys around New Zealand for this book. When I interviewed Keith Holmes at his home in Waikato he still had the bottle of wine given to him at his grand final in 1977. It had never been opened, and he insisted I take it and enjoy it. I decided I would do so in auspicious company (and with Keith) at the fiftieth reunion in Invercargill.

I babysat that bottle for several months and carefully cradled it from Hawke's Bay to Southland and to the celebration dinner in Invercargill. Then I dropped it (insert inappropriate language here).

Thank you to the old Young Farmers who have hosted me on my journeys around the country — it has been wonderful. Thank you also to all those people who, when asked about the idea for the book, told Young Farmers they should get Kate Taylor to write it. When they asked me if I wanted to, the answer was 100 per cent yes. And I've loved it. I even had a tear in my eye (okay, I was blubbing) when I wrote the last lines. I truly hope you enjoy reading it as much as I have enjoyed writing it. I hope I have captured the amazing feelings of family and kinship shared by former young farmers throughout the country. As technology and transport have improved, the need for our somewhat old-fashioned social networks has changed for millennials and Generation Z. But I hope the message remains — you don't go to Young Farmers, you are a Young Farmer. You're always a Young Farmer at heart.

KATE TAYLOR

TAKAPAU, HAWKE'S BAY

01 THE BIRTH OF THE CONTEST

OPPOSITE 2018 grand finalist Will Taylor competes in the Head-to-Head challenge in Invercargill.



In the beginning there was only a dream in the mind of a marketing man. That man was James (Jim) Collins, who returned from an overseas trip with the gem of an idea to start a radio agricultural quiz. He worked for international giant Skellerup Industries, and his idea turned into 50 years of the most prestigious rural competition in New Zealand.

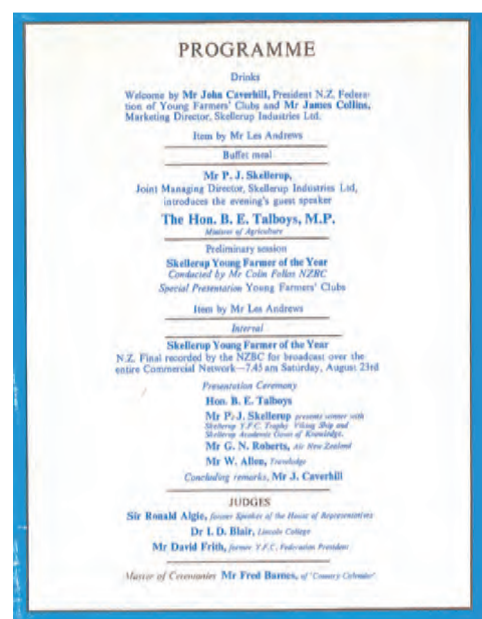
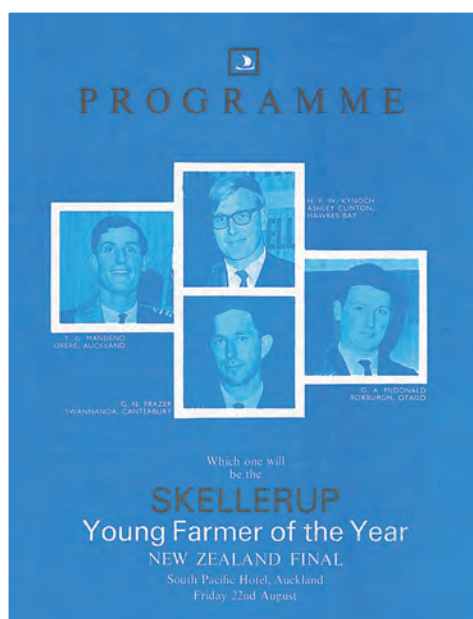
Jim's initial idea for a Young Farmer of the Year competition may have grown from an American TV and radio programme called *Voice of Agriculture*, produced by the California Farm Bureau Federation from 1964. In 1969 Jim was in San Francisco, where he saw a show in which young farmers competed for a prize by answering questions and performing tasks based on what they needed to know to be a successful farmer. The seeds of a New Zealand version were sown in Jim's mind. He approached Lincoln College, Canterbury, and they directed him to Young Farmers (also known as the NZ Federation of Young Farmers' Clubs or YFC).

Bill Penno was president of YFC at the time and Harry Wards was national secretary, appointed by the Ministry of Agriculture. 'After Jim's initial approach, Harry and I discussed the possibility of having a Young Farmer of the Year competition,' Bill recalls. 'We asked some prominent members of the organisation in Christchurch and Canterbury to work with him. They got it together and staged the event. Jim was a man of action and full of ideas and enthusiasm and was very keen for Skellerup to be involved. He was an entrepreneur in many ways. He came to us with a concept and we took it on.'

Bill says it was hard to imagine what the future of the contest would be. 'Our minds simply didn't stretch that far. It's amazing that it became a premier New Zealand event. That first year or two it was a good event but it was small, nothing like what it is now, and it sat alongside a whole lot of other competitions being run by Young Farmers at the time.'

Graham Robertson was national president in 1970. He, too, says it's hard to take credit for the success of the contest. 'While it would be easy to say we all saw enormous potential in the contest right from the beginning, the reality is it sort of stumbled into existence and grew from there.'

The Skellerup Young Farmer of the Year started as a radio quiz. Candidates nominated by their clubs and districts competed at one of the organisation's six provincial councils then went on to island semi-finals. The top two contestants from each semi-final went to the national final. The winner was awarded a trophy in the form of a Viking ship — the Danish



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Four faces — Tom Mandeno, Hamish Kynoch, Gordon McDonald and eventual winner Gary Frazer — were on the front of the 1969 programme; the list of dignitaries gives an indication of the event's prestige; the founding face of the Skellerup Young Farmer of the Year was James (Jim) Collins, who brought the idea back from the United States.

symbol of courage and adventure (Skellerup founder George W. Skellerup's family originated from Denmark). One story is that Jim Collins saw the ship in the window of a second-hand store and realised it would be perfect as a trophy for the competition.

The first national final was held in the Rangitoto Room at the South Pacific Hotel in Auckland on 22 August 1969. YFC national president John Caverhill gave the official welcome, the MC was Fred Barnes, founder of the television programme *Country Calendar*, and Minister of Agriculture Brian Talboys was the guest of honour. Contestants were quizzed on their knowledge of farming practices and general knowledge, and gave a two- to three-minute talk on an industry-related subject. The show was hosted by Colin Follas, and Peter Skellerup presented the trophy and a Cloak of Knowledge to the inaugural winner, Gary Frazer, a member of Cust-West Eyreton YFC in North Canterbury. The presenters were G.N. Roberts from Air New Zealand and W. Allen from Travelodge. Frazer won with 107 points; Hamish Kynoch of Hawke's Bay had 105, Gordon McDonald of Central Otago 102 and Tom Mandeno from Waikato 98.

Gary was farming 632 acres at West Eyreton at the time. He had left school early and worked on his father's farm near Rangiora before marrying Janet, who was an active Country Girls' Club member; they had then leased land to farm on their own account. Lack of schooling was no barrier to Gary — he read all the farming publications and listened to talks and discussions on farming topics. He was active in Young Farmers and served as club chairman, secretary and treasurer, and as district and council chairman. In a sense Young Farmers became his university, as journalist Mike Crean wrote in *The Press* in 2015, when Gary sold his extensive private collection of farm machinery. Gary died later that year.

Janet, who still lives in Rangiora, says Gary was proud of winning the contest and used to joke he must have done okay for it to continue for a second year. 'It definitely opened some doors for him and new opportunities,' she says. Gary became chairman of the contest organising committee and then went on to hold positions in Federated Farmers and United Wheat Growers. He also sold farm machinery. 'By the end of his farming career he was travelling all over New Zealand delivering tractors and all sorts of machinery. He did import some — we went overseas in 1992 and he made a lot of new contacts. Fergusons were his favourites but he sold all sorts . . . right up until about eight months before he died.'

Janet says many people remembered Gary winning the Young Farmer of the Year. 'He was the very first Young Farmer of the Year and he'd left high school and didn't have university study behind him. There were others like him who never went to university but as the prizes got better it got more academic, although they did add a practical section later.'

Runner-up Hamish Kynoch says his Takapau club had run its own practical farming competition about the same time as the new contest was being set up. Hamish was also a former winner of the Radio Leadership quiz that had been run by YFC until the new contest eventuated. But despite almost winning the inaugural Young Farmer of the Year, he had concerns. 'You could win this new competition and win prizes that were worth quite a lot, but you could be the best stock judge or fencer or shearer and woolhandler in the country, which needed a lot more expertise, and only win a cup. But Jim Collins wanted it to be a spectacle. The contest was very much his baby. All the little touches were his idea — the trophy, the

academic gown . . . He was an advertising man and did a very good job, obviously, because it has lasted 50 years.'

The following year Hamish was president of Young Farmers and says he didn't see much of Jim Collins. 'He didn't want to see me because I had told him the contest had too much emphasis on knowledge and not enough on practical. I sowed the idea and spoke for it strongly at Dominion executive, but I was really only involved for a few years after that. I wanted it to be fair for all Young Farmers. Really, in that first year, it was for the smartarses who were good at talking, so it was really just a bumped-up Radio Leadership contest. It was worth \$500 and a trip to Australia — that was big dough. Then later on, there was a tractor and all sorts of things, but Dominion executive had little to do with it. Jim set up a committee, which Gary [Frazer] chaired very well, and Jim wanted it, understandably, to be an advertisement for Skellerup. He was a marketing man.'

Hamish remembers very little of the event itself, except for the question to which he attributed Gary's close win. 'I was leading or in the run for it until the very last question. It was something about fodder radish and Gary was one of the very early sowers of it. I didn't have a clue what it was, but he had actually used it on his farm in Canterbury. It must have been a buzzer round of some sort because he had the answer and no one else did.'

Hamish remembers more about the East Coast regional final at the Wool Exchange in Napier and then winning the North Island semi-final in Palmerston North by answering a question about a bloat remedy. 'I must have read about it in an advertisement or farming magazine or something. I had no idea — I hadn't studied it. The answer came out and I had no idea where it came from and I don't know why I knew it. It won me the round and sent me to the national final.' His prize 'somewhere along the line' included spending \$25 on Skellerup products. 'We bought one of those shower roses that plug into the bath taps like you're putting cups on a cow — something Mum could use. We had it for a long time. For the regional we might have won a pair of gumboots too.'

Hamish's wife, Julia, was a great support through the build-up to the national final but couldn't attend in Auckland because she was pregnant with their third child. Hamish's parents attended and he still has the programme with their handwritten scores on the back. Hamish and Julia were farming at Ashley Clinton in Hawke's Bay and have since retired to Waipukurau. Hamish went on to be active in the National Party and was a two-term councillor and then two-term mayor in Central Hawke's Bay.

Gordon McDonald, who came third, had also previously won the Radio Leadership quiz. His memories of the Auckland event are sketchy, but he does recall feeling overwhelmed by the South Pacific Hotel. 'I was 25 but I hadn't travelled a lot in those days. I had no problem getting up and yapping in front of a crowd, but the surroundings were so different to the usual YFC debating competitions and the former radio programme.' A letter arrived in the post a few days later from Jim Collins thanking him for competing. 'Third prize was a pair of gumboots, but I never got them.' He says seeing an academic gown on the shoulders of someone in a Young Farmers competition took a bit of getting used to. 'But that was all part of Jim Collins' marketing to upscale it as much as possible. The flashy Viking ship trophy was all good advertising for Skellerup.' He says the guest speakers at the awards were always of the

highest calibre — Talboys at the national final, of course; at his South Island final the speaker was legendary shearer Godfrey Bowen, and at one of the North Island finals it was All Black Brian Lochore.

Gary's prize was \$500 cash and a return trip for two to Sydney flying Air New Zealand with accommodation at Travelodge. Janet says it was a lovely holiday and they extended it so they could visit more people while they were over there. 'That was a big prize back then,' she says.

Fellow contestant Tom Mandeno, who came fourth, says that while it was a great prize, the YFC international exchanges were still considered the 'Rolls-Royce' of trips away. He had wanted to go on a 4-H exchange to the United States, sponsored in part by the producer boards, and he believed entering the new Young Farmer of the Year contest would be a 'good warm-up' to interviewing for selection. Tom remembers studying hard for the national final. His objective was to gain valuable experience, including in coping with speaking on radio, in interviews and in front of a large audience. 'It equipped me for the exchange programme in Wellington, and I was successful in applying to go to the US in 1970. It was the first step on the ladder for all that followed.'

At 23, Tom was the youngest of the four contestants. 'There was a lot of excitement about it and a lot of dignitaries attended.' It was a big deal to have the Minister of Agriculture there — he mixed with everyone until late in the evening and stayed at the same hotel, which the finalists thought was wonderful. Tom remembers having a conversation with him that was to be a pivotal moment in his future career: Talboys suggested that if he wanted to get into governance (Tom had told him he would like to be a director of the New Zealand Wool Board one day), he should join Dalgetys as he himself had done. Tom eventually joined Dalgetys as a stock agent, and became an elected director of the Wool Board in 1991 and a director of Meat and Wool New Zealand from 2003 to 2009.

The judges for that first Skellerup Young Farmer of the Year final were former Speaker of the House Sir Ronald Algie, Lincoln College lecturer Ian Blair and former YFC president David Frith (1962), who went on to become a long-serving chairman of the New Zealand Meat Board. David had been involved in preparing the questions for the first final: 'It was a serious task without Google, fax or internet — just the phone and the post.' The judges had cards numbered 1 to 10. 'Many of the questions, being set by amateurs, could be answered in unforeseen ways that were partially correct. Ronald Algie was a former professor of English and then Speaker of the House and was more interested in the clarity of the answers, probably, than the accuracy of the subject matter. He was a gracious and interesting person who we enjoyed meeting. I think his presence, as a well-respected person, assisted with the ongoing recognition of the contest. The most difficult task on the night was keeping the score — again, without spreadsheets and maybe only pretty basic calculators. There were some very tense moments when scores did not look correct or were not immediately available, when contestants were close and with the leading contestant changing places. None of us would have envisaged the future success of the event, let alone going strong 50 years later.'

One of Jim Collins' sons, Ron Collins, who later also worked with the contest, says his father would have been 'absolutely rapt' to think his concept had grown and evolved over



ABOVE The 1969 finalists. From left: Gordon McDonald, Hamish Kynoch, Gary Frazer and Tom Mandeno.

BELOW At the first national final, held at the South Pacific Hotel in Auckland in August 1969, Young Farmers rubbed shoulders with MPs and other dignitaries.

five decades, still with the same focus on education, knowledge and striving for excellence in agriculture.

Every entrant and organiser in those early days knew Jim Collins. The contest was becoming an iconic and sought-after event for Young Farmers — and it was Jim's event. Nothing happened without his approval. Collins' older son, also called Jim, says his father would have wanted education to be his legacy. 'He had an educational focus he wanted to establish within the farming industry. He wanted to show it wasn't all just shearing sheep and milking cows but also the science behind it all, hence the Cloak of Knowledge having an academic feel. He thought farming was a skilful occupation that required a lot of education. You hear the stories today about what these young guys have to learn and do in the competition. There is a whole range of different skills they have to acquire, and the ones who win have been well educated, in different ways perhaps, but educated.'

Jim says his father was a young man in the 1930s and often talked about the Depression. His father struggled and he saw education as a way out. 'I was the first in the family to get a degree — he was very proud of that achievement. A thirst for education and "bettering oneself" was in his bones from early years. He had tuberculosis of the spine when he was a young man and studied advertising while lying on his back. He saw education as a way through for him to recover from the adversity of his illness. He had only been to secondary school for one year, as many did back then. He had a sense of wanting to improve himself because of that experience, and he associated improving himself with getting the best seats at the rugby and eating at the best restaurants.'

Jim Collins (senior) was a hard worker and a great achiever with a large number of social and community activities, particularly in the arts and the church (he was a lay canon at Christchurch Cathedral and had a close association with St James' Church in Riccarton). 'He was never a rich man in a material sense but in a special sense . . . he had very good people around him all the time. Our house was always filled with people prominent in music and opera or the church,' Jim says. 'He was a very social guy, always in conversation. He was generous. He had a keen and inquisitive mind, always interested in other people and learning from them. He had people from all walks of life around him. People liked him and liked having him around. He came from such a humble background — a lot of the people he associated with had a lot more than he did. Maybe he always felt a little inferior but he achieved a lot from those small opportunities. When the Young Farmer of the Year came about, he got those young men inspired. The whole organisation was inspired by this idea of education and improvement and having that celebrated via the competition.'

Jim Collins (senior) worked for Skellerup until the late 1970s and was still consulting for the company when he died in 1984, aged 74.



ABOVE 1969 winner Gary Frazer. Strong winds on the day of this photo shoot required that his gown be pinned to his trousers with safety pins, and he also had to keep working a dog behind him to hold the sheep in place.

BELOW Gary Frazer making his winner's acceptance speech.