

# New Zealand sisters' farm truck tale scoops book awards

By **BRUCE HOTCHKISS**  
Senior Editor

A children's book written by two New Zealand sisters that draws on their memories of the 1921 Republic truck they grew up with, is drawing rave reviews.

Barely over jet lag from a return flight from Michigan where the book was released in June, author Jennifer Somervell, says she was completely stunned by the news.

The book, called "The New Old Truck" has captured several awards as 'a magnificent children's book which combines family history with international travel and times.'

Illustrated by the author's sister, Margery Fern, the story explores the love affair of children on a farm with their aging "Old Truck" and their campaign to save him.

The real Old Truck, a 1921 Model 10 Republic, was restored by their brother John Somervell, keeping a promise he made his father when he was 12 years old.

But the project faltered when parts of the truck were lost in a garage fire.

The truck went through a long period uncovered, and finally the flood waters of the river adjacent to John's home, swept over the bonnet.



**Sisters Jennifer Somervell, left, and Margery Fern have combined to produce a children's book based on a 1921 Model 10 Republic truck that used to be on their family farm.**

**Republic was once a giant in truck industry**

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Republic Motor Truck Company was a manufacturer of commercial trucks circa 1913-1929, in Alma, Michigan.

By 1918, it was recognized as the largest exclusive truck manufacturer in the world, and the maker of one out of every nine trucks on the roads in the United States.

It was one of the major suppliers of "Liberty trucks" used by American troops during World War I.

The author, Edgar Rice Burroughs the creator of Tarzan, purchased a Republic truck in 1916 and drove it across the United States.

His exploits were later published in the pamphlet "An Auto-Biography" and distributed by Republic.

By 1918, Republic was advertising in such national publications as the *Saturday Evening Post*, declaring that one goes to "Damascus for swords, Teheran [sic] for rugs, Lynn for shoes, Rochester for cameras, Dayton for cash registers, Alma for trucks."

More than 3,000 dealers served the

# Book . . .

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Altogether, it took John more than 35 years and three complete restorations before he realized his promise to his father and showed the truck at a national vintage rally — a very proud day in 2012.

“His dedication and faithfulness to Old Truck touched my heart,” said Jennifer. “I felt there was a story and a message in it for children and

adults as well. To John the truck was important in that it connected him to family now gone.

“To children reading the story Old Truck is a living part of the family — to abandon it would be like abandoning your grandfather!”

John told his sisters that the truck was made in Alma, Mich.

Both teachers, they thought this was interesting educationally. So when the book sold out in New Zealand in 2013, Jennifer’s husband sourced historical material from Alma Public Library in Michigan to

incorporate in the revised edition.

They were delighted when the library, already a publisher of historical books, put up their hand to distribute the book in America. “The New Old Truck” was launched in Alma, surrounded by vintage Republic trucks. Alma library director, Bryan Dinwoody said it was “a unique association brought together by a truck that is almost a century old!”

Jennifer, who attended the launch with her husband said, “Old Truck would have been very much at home, surrounded by his aged, extended

family!”

In Michigan Jennifer saw the book connecting people with their history, just as it has in New Zealand. Prior to the launch she and her husband visited local schools in central Michigan.

Says Jennifer, “It’s neat that Old Truck ‘came home’, in a children’s book. In classrooms, children were really interested — in the truck, in New Zealand and the family connections and in their town’s ‘truck history’. They were amazed to learn that Alma once produced thousands of world class trucks.”

# Republic ...

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United States, with additional dealers in at least 56 foreign countries and colonies.

In 1917, Republic purchased a major supplier, Torbensen Axle Company.

In 1927, Republic purchased the Linn Manufacturing Company, makers of the heavy duty Linn tractor.

The return of the Liberty trucks to the United States after World War I led to a major reduction in demand for trucks.

Republic's production volume dropped from nearly 30,000 in 1918 to 1,453 in 1921.

Selling Torbensen Axle in 1922 (later Eaton Axle and Spring, now Eaton Corporation) was insufficient to meet cash demands, and Republic was forced into receivership.

After reorganization, the company attempted unsuccessfully to regain its former status as a preferred manufacturer.

After the sudden death of its president, Oliver Hayes, in 1928, the company merged with the American LaFrance Company to become LaFrance-Republic.

LaFrance-Republic in turn was purchased by the Sterling Motor Truck Company in 1931, which was purchased by the White Motor Company in 1951.

A parts depot for Republic existed in Alma until 1957.



**This is the actual 1921 Republic "Old Truck" that serves as the subject of the book, *The New Old Truck* (See Page 31) as sisters Jennifer Somervell and Margery Fern remember it from their teen years. This photo taken in the late 1960s, near the end of its working life, carting hay on the family farm in Hawkes Bay, New Zealand. The deck of the truck was extended so it could carry 80 bales of hay.**

*Photo courtesy Jennifer Somervell*