As a keen genealogist and student of New Zealand (NZ) history, my overwhelming desire when I became redundant from a 30-year career dealing with databases was to make a splash in a new career as an indexer. Having had the experience of opening up the original documents of our ancestors' lives, I wanted the feeling of taking my laptop into a library and opening up a resource for NZ family and social historians. This meshed with the fact that I knew that there was a cabinet of microfilms in the Auckland Public Library from the complete history of the New Zealand Woman's Weekly (NZWW), a magazine which started life in the throes of the depression, in late 1932. I grew up with this magazine from the 1950s and indeed had appeared in a photo back when I was a blues musician in the early 1970s, as had other people I had known, because the NZWW always included articles about locals and their contributions, even a children's page. When I investigated further, I found the issues prior to 1951 had contained several social columns from around the regions, altogether more local content and photographs than I had imagined, and many items that I thought might well be lost to the generations up to 75 years later. I chose to focus on this period and those identifiable New Zealanders who had been mentioned in one way or another in the magazine, for even in the early stages NZWW provided the author with an opportunity to start her second career by contributing to the work of researchers into New Zealand social history.

An index of the New Zealand Woman's Weekly, 1933–50: an indexing challenge

Julie Daymond-King

An index of the New Zealand Woman's Weekly provided the author with an opportunity to start her second career by contributing to the work of researchers into New Zealand social history.
particular challenges, apart from correcting what mixups I could, about for example Niccol, Nicoll, Nicholl, Nicolle, Nicol, Nicoll and all its plurals. Titles were a particular nuisance, so I got in the habit of using websites such as kinderlibrary.ac.nz for Anglican clergy, nzma.org.nz for medical doctors, nzetc.org.nz (the NZ Electronic Text Centre) for Second World War ranks and the Dictionary of National Biography (dbnz.govt.nz) to find at least the initials of a titled person. But eliminating all duplicates on my own was impossible, and I had to acknowledge that, and hope that feedback might eliminate more. Even so, I cut the database down by nearly 10,000 names (there being still the same number of 50,600 records of course). There are however many names with multiple entries, so that the total number of names in records is over 230,000. It got so that after the thousandth time I found myself almost unable to type ‘Barbara’!

So those two to three months of editing were unexpected slog but of big help to my morale was the licensing of the database to The Knowledge Basket, an online repository of digital indexes. This turned out to be the portal of choice for the EPIC project, a digital publishing initiative sponsored by a large consortium of New Zealand libraries, enabling them to offer substantial royalties to the copyright holders of their indexes. The second quarter January to March 2008 shows a tremendous increase in the uptake of information with the statement from SuperIndex showing 844 ‘view’, which I’m told signify successful searches. The third quarter has gone back to first quarter levels, but I hope signifies a base line of continuing use by subscribers.

I wanted to persist with my original idea though, to also put out a CD, with the runtime version of DB/Textworks on it, and my index textbase. I had to write a readme file which was not difficult. But then I had to acquaint myself with how to program the opening menu, query screens and so on, and that was quite demanding, as I was depending heavily on the manual, and also relying on my daughter for tricky things with logos and the like. Said daughter’s skills with Photoshop were also highly valuable in getting the CD cover designs completed, and it was a real thrill to get permission to end up with exactly the look I wanted on the front – a ‘colourized detail’ of a photo from the Alexander Turnbull Library’s online collection of Hedda Dyson, the early ‘editress’, who exerted such a strong influence during her 15 years running the magazine. Testing the CD was also hard; so many of my friends used a Mac and there was no DB/Textworks edition available for them. The NZ Woman’s Weekly office itself also used Macs, though they were happy to run a full-page article about the project. Other local genealogists did not have the right set-ups and every time I used a family PC I had to deinstall after testing. Eventually I got my local computing company to write a autorun installation for the textbase software since so many folk seemed unusued to seeing the file extensions and could not locate the right setup file. Copying my textbase to the same folder as the software is still a manual process for the installer.

Frustrations over, I was in the business of making sales, and slowly they started to arrive, firstly from libraries who held the microfilms and wanted to load a PC for independent researchers. That was very gratifying as library staff themselves had online access. Some branches of the NZ Society of Genealogists acquired a CD. In early 2008 I attended their annual conference, where I made further sales. It was great to at last meet one of those child contributors, who was thrilled to be able to locate her poems and penfriend descriptions. When I found a further 18 records of her letters being answered by The Sunshine Lady, she was keen to buy the CD. I did free lookups and was able to find relatives often enough to be satisfying. Of course, 90,000 people 75–57 years ago have many more descendants now! A common misperception is that these folk must be ‘society people’. You could get mentioned in the Woman’s Weekly for getting a massage diploma, or playing hockey, or being a pigeon fancier, or having a baby born while your husband was away at war.

Another worthwhile aspect of the sales trip was to become aware I could possibly continue the index by interloaning microfilms and acquiring a microfilm reader to be housed in my local library, or even in my home instead of travelling long distances for each indexing session. Each library here seems to be able to make its own decisions about whether it is willing to take part in this plan, and the cost of a reconditioned reader is quite high. But I believe it will be a long time before the historical magazine is digitized, and even if it were I know my index will be far superior to the results of any search engine. There were simply too many errors, which I have realized were the result of so many different contributors being part of the process: from the spies of the social columnists, the handwritten reports from club secretaries handed over the counter, to the typist, the editor, the compositors, photographers and so on. One of my favourite examples is a photograph of a future All Black captain as a cute child labelled Wilson Winray (instead of Whineray).

So I am proud that I did what I set out to do and may yet continue the work, although so far I haven’t had the personal contact with researchers that I would have hoped for, and I am still waiting for a review by the NZSG magazine. Other rewards are unexpected. One was being instrumental in getting a meaning specific to journalism for the word ‘rat’, into the NZ Dictionary Centre database, since they have now located a citation for its meaning of a subsidiary job under another non plume. This came out of being able to interview one of the social columnists of the era, and the mother of an old friend. These contacts and sharing the magazine’s interesting and sometimes very amusing contents are the real highlights.

I was also delighted to be able to supply a biographer of playwright Bruce Mason with references to his juvenilia as a child contributor to the magazine, which include a rather delightful story. In a different direction, I was able to contribute material to a book on earlier popular music in New Zealand.

I also set up a website, JDKindexes.co.nz, to promote my work and receive orders, also for book indexing. As a member of ANZSI, I attended training courses in book and periodical indexing part way through my project, and felt validated on the pathway I was on.

Julie Daymond-King, MANZSI, MA (Hons), Dip Prof Ethics, is currently a business administrator and book indexer, and lives in Helensville, New Zealand.
Email: julie@JDKindexes.co.nz