

11th August 1982 Mr. Ron Kerr of the Hardware Store in Station Street, Fairfield.

Could we start off by asking you when you first had your shop?

"Well it first started off, you may remember when we had 2 hardware stores in Fairfield. There was one right in the middle, a Hardware Store by the name of Brown, roughly where Robert Kenic the Pharmacy is now, close to that, and then a Mr. Collins, you would probably remember him,

I can only remember Mr. Henwood on the other corner, what year would these other people be?

"Right, well, this would be approximately 1926, I'd say, yes, 1926 roughly, to the best of my recollection about that. That's going back awhile and then Mr. Collins who was employed by D. W. Chandler in Brunswick Street, Fitzroy, decided to open a Hardware store against Brown and he rented the shop where I am now from my father, that's how it started off and he employed George Henwood. Eventually Mr. Collins decided it was time he expanded himself and he went over the road on the opposite corner, that's 128 Station Street, and bought out a Grocer whose name defeats me for the moment and I can't think, I know it as well as anything, anyway he then employed George Henwood over there and eventually then in deciding that perhaps Fairfield wasn't his meter he sold out to George Henwood, before that it happened that when my father, who was a Hardware man, he then had the store empty, Mr. Collins had gone out, he'd decided to open in opposition against him and so therefore we had my father on one corner, where I am now, and Perc. Collins over on the other corner employing George Henwood. Then he sold out to George Henwood and he moved to High Street, Northcote and then George carried on in opposition against myself, we were good friends then and we still are good friends. Until the time about 10 years ago when George decided that his health was not good enough he sold out to me.. Basically,

Henwood's been gone more than 16 years?

"No 10 years, 10 or 11 it may be 16, but round about that. As a matter of fact I almost, with your approval, I rang George and asked him to come down, because I thought of it, and I thought of it and because I didn't know, so that's the story and

What about some of the other shops in the area?

"The older ones are probably Bill Walker, he would be, in fact I think he would a little older in the area than I, just by a whisker"

That's the shoe shop?

"Yes, that's right, we had a number of others there was Eddie Amery in the newsagents, where the supermarket is now -

Tuckerbag?

"Tuckerbag, of course he's been long gone, he sold out, then as you know the newsagent went across the road"

The newsagent was where Tuckerbag was, Amery?

"Yes, Eddie Amery, also strangely enough he used to work for my father

in the timber game, so that the association sort of carried on from there. Until relatively recently we had Bill Poppins of Poppins and Coombs Furniture store. Again there was Mrs. Linegar who had the paint store further up the street where the SSW is now.

Linegar?

"Yes, Mrs. Linegar, she's naturally gone now. Its a good idea because you need prompting.

Now up the other end, up the southern end, as you've already said, Wally Acfield who made the Aurora Cycle and made a very good job of it down on the northern side in the Bicycle field we had Len Collyer with the Seagull Cycle which I happened to have one years ago, a very good cycle it was too, in fact, they both made very good cycles. Other identities in the area at that particular time would be the Kimptons who had the second-hand store up alongside Wally Acfield, that's going back a long time."

Where was Wally Acfield?

"Wally Acfield was where the Quixley, Quixley the Estate Agent is,

The Estate Agent?

Yes, in one of those shops, round that particular area. Then we had Moran & Cato's alongside him and then they sold out to the National Store, I think it was called National, that was a bit of a mixture store, a mixture of haberdashery, a complete department store in miniature that was, but they didn't last very long. Then we had Roy Booth, the vegetable and fruiterer also down that particular bracket of stores. Getting down further we had my aunt, Mrs. Hargraves who had the fruit and vegetables where Biviano is now. They were old Fairfield identities they originally had my father's store before Mr. Collins opened the hardware store, they had fruit and vegetables there, then moved across the road to where Mr. Carmon, the Delicatessen is now.

You missed out on one of the Kerwins -

Oh, of course, there you are you see you forget them. Kerwins, yes, Kerwins had the milk bar there for many, many years they were related by marriage to the Panthers

Kerwins were related to Panthers I've never heard that?

"Yes they were, I think it was, it might be a correction, you can check with George on this one, Panthers daughter married one of the sons, Sid Panther married one of the Kerwin girls, Ethel I think. but I might be corrected on that.

The other one married George Davis.

"That's right, who was the George Davis was the captain of the Latrobe Golf Club, that's the other Kerwin. Then Kerwins built on the other side, what's now called Kerwin's Corner.

That was after the Picture Theatre was finished?

"Yes, that's right. The Picture Theatre, there's another very interesting part, that was going back I think it opened, from memory

only, again I could be corrected, it opened with "The Singing Fool" by Al Jolson or the first one he made. The first talking picture was screened in Fairfield."

The very first talking picture ?

"The very first talking picture was screened in Fairfield, I don't know how long afterwards, but it had very good accoustics, the Fairfield Theatre, in spite of it being such a barn of a place, and they used to check out, the picture companies used to check out a film that they didn't know how there sound was going to, they deliberately brought it to Fairfield.

Yes, I've heard that.

"Well alongside them, this is rather rambly itswinging a bit, but then there was Brown's milk bar and sweet shop right alongside the theatre, they were also there for many, many years.

Then there was McLeans?

"On the opposite side Coles bought out McLeans who were there

McLeans the Drapers?

"McLeans the drapers, they had the biggest drapery store in Fairfield, it was a good one too, it was the largest size store. There's another point, Coles, originally were further up the street near Moran & Cato's. Then they decided they needed bigger premises and they bought out McLeans and enlarged it of course and carried on from there. Its probably still not big enough for them -

No, its very small.

"As far as Coles is concerned, I wouldn't want it to get any bigger, they do enough damage to me already. "

"The story of the parking area which exists at the moment in Gillies Street, most of that land was vacant, was owned by George Harris, the butcher and the traders got together and petitioned the Council to purchase the land and turn it into a very nice size car park, because we recognised the fact that without that car park the shopping centre would die, and naturally there was only one house that had to be pulled down so we have the same objections and we have just finished paying for it last year, 15 years it took.

Who paid for it?

"The traders, the Chamber of Commerce, of which I happened to be the President,

You bought that land?

"You didn't know that? Well the Chamber of Commerce, or rather all of the members in it and those who were owners and occupiers of shops, over a period of 15 years, paid the Council back, with interest of course, for the acquisition from George Harris and the surfacing and the general clean up of the car park."

How much did that cost, can I ask that?

"Yes, it was done on a rateable basis, I think, if I remember rightly it was \$215.00 per year for 15 years from each trader in the area. Perhaps people don't know that, but that is a fact. We also foresee the need for another parking area on the other side of the shopping area, that's on the west side of Arthur Street, we have petitioned the Council once again but we ran into a very big snag, the residents got up a petition, and I might add that they had quite a good case, too that didn't want the same area, for various reasons, on the west side of Arthur Street, as we had on the east side of Gillies Street. So at a Council meeting they made their objections loud and strong, with the result Council backed down a little bit and decided to have a Public meeting. The up-shot of it is, I believe, but I haven't been notified officially as I commented in the Leader the other day, that there is a petition before roster to make the west side of Arthur Street an angle parking area. We hope that that comes to pass, as a compromise between,

Well that is better isn't it, Well as a resident I would think so.

"Well its a reasonable compromise, I personally am aware, and I think it is, so we'll see how that eventuates, which would mean of course, that possibly only one house might be demolished, not as a parking area but as a walk-way through, possibly landscaped, that type of thing. Back to the story of the parking areas in Fairfield which we consider to be vitally necessary. I don't want to turn this into a propaganda session.

Now, the hardware trade has changed over the last 40 years, nearly 50 years, I should say. Where we used to weigh out items now everything is pre-packaged, as it also is of course in the meat and food trade, due to various factors, such as wage costs, storage space, quite a numbers of factors, which means that this is the way the trade has developed. We've also had an influx of flats, various types of units and other high density areas where there are mainly transitory people, mainly, they will live in it perhaps 18 months or 2 years before they build their own places, so you get a changing population with their various needs. They will not do a lot to it but they will make it as comfortable as they can for the period of time that they are staying there. That's been a big change in the Fairfield shopping area. We now have highly competitive food trade in Fairfield, which does bring for help for the consumer. The same thing applies to butchery as it does to grocery, there is also a move to extend the shopping area, whether this will take place or not I don't know, that's at the moment up before Council to consider. It extends now, instead of the shopping area finishing, shall we say at where the Chinese cafe, restaurant is, it may continue to Mitchell Street on both sides, this is the implication of the letter I received a short time ago. This is a two-edge sword, while it creates more competition it does run the risk of extending a strip centre which Station Street, is -

What do you mean by that?

"Well a strip centre is where you have 2 locations, one on each side of the street and a fairly long extended street. The dangers in that are that you become an area such as High Street, Northcote. It becomes too long and unweildy. Its no secret until Northcote Plaza opened that Station Street was the most viable shopping centre in the Northcote area and that's on the authority of the Town Planner. So anything which destroys that is naturally not in the best interests of either the shopper or the traders. I think that we do have a reasonable cross-section of trades and services in Fairfield and I can see no valid reason for an extension, perhaps an odd one or two shops that we don't have, for instance we have a new diner I believe, opening today up alongside

the Chinese cafe. That should be a move in the right direction, I think."

And don't you think that Station Street is still a bit like a village shopping centre where people meet and talk, this is very good, I think, in an area?

"It is good I agree, many people know each other in Fairfield which is like the country scene and this has helped to keep the centre viable because they will meet one another down the street and have a little bit of a chat before they part, whereas in the Regional Centres, which we have a proliferation of, this doesn't happen, people are too busy darting here, there and everywhere. So it would be a pity if it went down hill but we are going to try to see that it doesn't.

The change towards an attitude of history, my son was only saying yesterday that whilst his interest in history at school was practically nil, now that we are having many, many more people interested in history and particularly in Fairfield history, then he's become much more interested, and this, remember, is from a young person. So this is a good thing and if it goes down for other people in 50 years time to say, that's what it was like, and whilst I can't, from personal experience, go back beyond about 1926 I vividly remember my father saying that he remembers when the horse tram ran up Station Street. You probably heard this and the land sales. There was a lot of money won and lost on land sales at that time, in fact, I think the marquee where they had that, was somewhere round about the corner of Darebin Road and Station Street, this is as far as I can understand. The horse tram did definitely run down Station Street. No there's another old identity, Rowlands, the barber. Now he had that photo of the horse tram in Mr. Rowlands barber's shop, I remember it very very well. I believe it is still floating around somewhere, someone's got it. My grandmother, that is my father's mother, was the first care-taker of the State School, Fairfield.

Fairfield State School?

"Yes, Fairfield State School."

That was a Kerr?

"Yes, the first one there"

The first caretaker?

"Yes, the first caretaker, and the name of the headmaster, from memory was a person by the name of Sebire, S, E, B, I, R, E. Cocky Sebire they used to call him, so I understand, naturally he wasn't in my time. Mr. Carter was the headmaster in my particular year."

You went to Fairfield State School?

"Yes, I went there I spent 8 years I think, approximately and loved every minute of it.

Yes prices, of course, have altered remarkedly."

Well so have wages?

"Yes, that's quite true, wages and prices go hand in hand together and I can remember selling nails for four pence a pound and having to weigh them up myself from big bins."

What would you reckon the wage would be in those days, the basic wage?

"Basic wage in those days was round about 2 pounds a week approximately."

That would be in the early 20's?

"Yes, the early 20's"

Yes.

"There some that got a little bit more and some got quite a lot less, but that would be about the average wage, I particularly started off I think it was 7/6 per week if I remember rightly, and that naturally has gone by the board a bit. I was talking nails before, four pence a pound and now we are looking at \$1.75 so there's an increase of 50 times, but then again wages, where they were \$4.00 equivalent now its \$250.00 so its probably very much in proportion.

Yes probably, that's right, yes.

Yes when you work it out in terms. Talking about the depression of the early 30's, there are similarities, similarities between then and now,

All the unemployment now in 1982?

"Yes that's right, there are similarities where people were unable to get jobs, people who were willing to work could not get jobs because the jobs weren't available and then there were long queues for jobs, as you've already said there were 2 or 3 behind you waiting if you faltered there would be 2 or 3 more wanting to get your job. The iniquitous dole as it was called, was handed out and men as a general rule had to accept that or their families starved."

It was called the sustenance in those days.

"It was called the susso, if you were on susso it was a derogatory term and there were many people, through no fault of their own, they just could not get jobs. So comparing that to now, on that basis, there is a similarity and I would hate to see it happen again. Coming down on the east side adjacent to Duncan Street, we had Mr. Thorpe, with his shoe store, who I believe has since passed on. Then we had properties owned by very well known identities in the area, Mr. and Mrs. Woods, who lived in Arthur Street for as long as I can remember.

They were houses there?

"They were houses in Arthur Street, yes."

You speaking in Arthur Street now?

"Yes, only as far as where they lived. They had the shops"

Oh, they had shops, what sort of shops?

"They had, there was a library there,

Oh, a library?

"There was a library there and well that was part of Mr. er,

X

Mr. Thorpe's shoe shop, he had a library, did he?

"No, Mr. Thorpe had the shoe store and Mr. Wood who actually owned the two properties adjacent were the , where the little tea shop is now, and the Opportunity shop, they were owned by Mr. Wood for many, many years.

Coming down further we had Mr. Cuthbertson, the Jeweller who was there for over a long period of years, he has since retired from business and coming down still further we had the house where my Aunt, Mrs. Hargraves lived, who had the fruit vegetable store right opposite where Mr. Biviano is now and we had another old identity in the area, Mr. Seymour who had the watch repair shop which is now the State Savings Bank, that was pulled down.

There was a jeweller further along, too wasn't there past the Picture Theatre, round about where that men's hairdresser ~~used to be~~. There was a Jeweller's shop there?
 is now ✓

"Yes, to my knowledge the first one in the area, the first doctor in the area, the doctor was Dr. Heffernan who had his practice where Dr. ~~Solan~~ is now, on the south side of the railway line.

Solwyn

In Station Street?

"Yes in Station Street, he was the original doctor and he would deliver many, many babies in Maris ~~Down~~ which is opposite. He was very popular as of course most ^{doctors are} and there was also in later times and not so later, Dr. ~~Kelly's~~ father was also at the same time in Wingrove Street, and he was, I think he came just a little later on."

Dr. James, or was it Dr. Paul?

"Dr. Paul came after Dr. Heffernan. Yes, he was my original doctor. He was a very, very well liked man also, so we have been well served for doctors in the area."

There was never anywhere much you could buy a present in Fairfield, when we were first married we didn't have a car and if you were going anywhere for a birthday party or anything and you wanted a present, unless you went to Smith Street, there wasn't anywhere much in Fairfield where you could buy a present. There was Mr. Cuthbertson had a few things there and that other Jeweller but there was nowhere else, it is only recently that your shop or in more recent years, that your shop has put in things that you can go and buy something for a wedding present, or a birthday present, there was nowhere in Fairfield, do you realise that?

"Yes, but also Mr. Henwood did, he had a bit of giftware also."

What did he have?

"Well there was, well he had very good crockery and glassware, possibly not as much as a range -

See he might have had something that you didn't want to spend that much money, or you just wanted a little ordinary -

"Knick-knack"

We weren't very well served at all.

"No, but now I think we have a proliferation of that"

Yes we have now, yes

"So I'd say that that's been a very great improvement on what it used to be when I first started.

Then there was another hairdresser where Mr. Devita is now, called Mr. Favalora and he built the shops that are there now, about 1935 I think. Then there was Mr. Dynan the butcher, another very, very well known man, do you remember him?"

Dynan, the butcher?

"Mr. Dynan, the butcher, right next door."

Do you remember the sports store, were they there for very long?

"I think they started off as a boot shop didn't they?"

You used to be able to get shoe repairs done there?

"Yes that's right and then they expanded into the sports store."

Dewars is about where Columbo is now I think, no where the Chemist Wren and Barker, yes they bought there.

"Yes, "

They were further down in a smaller shop?

"True."

It was Michael Wren by himself in a smaller shop?

"Yes"

When they moved it became Wren & Barker?

"They partnershiped. They are grandsons of some of the famous old identities of the district."

There are 2 Fish and Chip shops in Station Street, now, but there was only Sam's I think it was called, wasn't on the north, no, the south side of the railway line, wasn't there one up in the other part of the shopping centre, too?

"No, there's a hamburger place. Original hamburger Bill, but I can't remember his name either."

There was a dentist there round about where the State Savings Bank is wasn't there?

"No, where the Commercial bank is now".

I just can't think of his name.

"French it would have been"

No I'm not sure about that we'll find out. The menswear store, Snowy Thompson's menswear store.

"Snowy Thompson's menswear store, there was a menswear store there for years and years.