



Fitzroy History Society Oral History Project 2015-2017

Transcript of interview with Peter Williams

(Interviewed by Meg Lee and Alison Hart from the Fitzroy History Society at Fitzroy on 10 April 2015)

Peter Williams speaks about the history of Moran & Cato's manufacturing grocers and wholesalers located in Brunswick Street Fitzroy, which was the centre for a large grocery chain throughout Melbourne and Victoria from the 1880s to the 1960s. Both his grandfather and his father worked there over a period stretching back to early last century. He describes his memories of visiting his father at work in the late 1940s and 1950s and other memories of a variety of Fitzroy businesses of the time.



START OF TRANSCRIPT

Facilitator: Interview with Peter Williams on 10 April.

Facilitator: It's 10 April and this is an interview with Peter Williams. So yeah, if you could just give us some of that basic background on your name, family and your connections to Fitzroy just very briefly. [0:14]

Peter Williams: Well I live in Eaglemont, that's where I grew up in Ivanhoe and I was born in 1938 and my father, Bill Williams, worked and was part of the firm of Moran & Cato's in Brunswick Street. My grandfather was also there from like 120 years ago, nearly, and he handled the engineering part of the business because he was interested in that. Various members of the family who ran that business, they were all nearly related, cousins, all specialised in various parts of the business.

They weren't just totally grocers, they were manufacturing grocers and wholesalers too and it was a very, very big business that started off with Tom Moran originally working for a grocer in Brunswick Street called Murdoch, and Murdoch had a couple of shops, I think grew to about three or four in the 1870s. Tom Moran got the bright idea and he went into business with one shop down there in Brunswick Street, I've got the original documents to do with that, 1872 or '74 period and the value of the stock at the time, so that goes back a long way.

That building is still there, it's one of a group of three in a little terrace of shops in Brunswick Street, a bit closer to the city than the old M&C building. As the years went on it became quite a successful little business and his cousin, who was a man called Fred Cato, was actually living in New Zealand as a school teacher. He had been born near the goldfields at Stawell in Victoria where his father was a miner and Fred was born in 1858. He went to New Zealand and he corresponded with his cousin who was Tom Moran who was living in Fitzroy, Collingwood here, was there an opportunity to come back.

He married a lady who was the daughter of a missionary in New Zealand, Bethune was her surname, and he wrote a series of letters back to her before he finally married her and those letters were published in a book some years ago by Una Porter called *Growing Together* and they're more - it's a massive volume of love letters but it's really very interesting and he's mentioning how difficult business was in various parts in those days. [3:03]

But it was a successful business and the policy was - they were very strict Wesley and Methodists, and I mean very strict - but they didn't borrow money unless they



really had to and that very rarely ever happened. You didn't open a new branch if you were able to until you could afford it, all that sort of thing. In those earlier days the two partners lived separately, one in North Melbourne in the residence above a shop and the other one above the shop in Smith Street on the corner of Johnston Street named Branch No 8 which is still there, that building.

It became a successful chain bit by bit through their own efforts and then in the 1890s they expanded a bit further into manufacturing grocery, their own branded products, and when the opportunity came to acquire the trading name Rosella from two fellows who'd started the business and really couldn't continue after a few weeks. Fred Cato bought the name for a handful of pound notes effectively, got control of it and formed the Rosella Preserving Company in 1895. So that was run separately from a separate premises at North Melbourne, then Flinders Street and then later at Richmond.

Moran & Cato's as their grocery always sponsored the products made by Rosella for obvious reasons. It became the leading jam, the leading tomato sauce, the leading tomato soup and all that sort of stuff. Down here at Fitzroy the shops varied all over the place. They moved - they rented a number of places to start with, obviously, and then were able to buy the premises. They were on the corner of Brunswick Street and Moor Street, on various corners there.

They had good relationship with a husband and wife team called William and Ann Bennetts who were well known and had been in business even longer than before they were. [5:22]

Peter Williams: Well they started as chemists-, I'm not sure if they started as chemists but they were certainly in general produce and that sort of thing. I've got a splendid photograph of that shop on the corner of Moor Street, a time of a picnic where with all the vans outside and so forth. So it was a business that gradually grew when they could afford it. But by 1890 Tom Moran died and Fred Cato, who was only a third owner of the business at that stage, had to continue the business because Elizabeth, his late partner's widow only had two young children and of course they were unable to run the business.

But Elizabeth was a very astute lady, but she held the larger number of shares in the business of the two. Then other family members came into it, cousins and so forth and they shared the risk and the running of the business as the years went on. That's when my grandfather came in.

Facilitator: How did your grandfather get to be...



[Over speaking]

Peter Williams: He was a cousin of the Morans way, way back. I've got letters written from Tom Moran to an ancestor of mine in the 1870s which is nice to have, and I've got account books and cheques, all sorts of bits of memorabilia fortunately that didn't go into the rubbish tip. My own grandfather was very meticulous in keeping inwards letters and he kept them in a filing system I call the shoebox. The letters went back into the envelopes and were filed in shoeboxes and they were easy to find in there. ... Lots of records, I still use shoeboxes regularly to file stuff in, but good quality shoeboxes and it's a very good filing system. Because if you - as well as filing cabinets and so forth. But that was a business, that's - I have an interest in Fitzroy basically through that, that's where it started.

[7:24]

Peter Williams: My grandfather he ran the engineering side of the business, he overlooked or kept an eye on everything that went on at Rosella because in 1921-22 he went to Sydney and bought all the boilers and Weirs pumps and things out of the battlecruiser Australia for the Rosella plant in Sydney and in Richmond, in Balmain Street and it grew and grew. They had nearly 1200 employees at Rosella separately from the grocery business. That's how successful it was, it grew. There were not just nameless, faceless shareholders in it from other places, either.

Balmain Street Richmond was a very big operation. All the tomatoes and things had to be brought down from Tatura, Shepparton and those areas where they'd buy them in and in later years because of that problem they established a plant at Tatura where they could process tomato paste on site up there. But in addition the Rosella company had over 150 branded different products, it was a lot with all the jams and things, they were very successful, and sauces and condiments.

They got into the provedoring business very early in the piece with a business called Australian Wholesale Grocery so they could sell products to other grocers with not their own name on it and also supply stuff. So they were one of the original big wholesalers, but they weren't the only ones. There was Henry Berry's and there were other, [Rolf's] and things, so they had a lot of competition but they specialised in tea, particularly, and they became the biggest tea merchants in Australia at the turn of the century.

Facilitator: Yes, I've seen a photograph of tea packing in the white building on the corner of Brunswick Street and Victoria Street.



Peter Williams: That's right.

Facilitator 2: Moran & Cato owned that business. [9:27]

Peter Williams: A lot of businesses there along Victoria Street, I know all the numbers and they were built progressively. Now when they moved in the 1890s the building on the corner of Victoria Street and Brunswick Street, which is a four storey building with an extra piece that's been tacked on the top now, was built in 1896. It has the cement work date of 1882 on the parapet on the corner, that's not the date the building was built, it's the date of the actual official partnership between Tom Moran and Fred Cato.

Yes, it says 1882 on the building. Now that building became the head office for the other grocery stores and so forth and as far as I can be sure it was almost a vacant block of land when they bought it. It had been used by the Melbourne Tramway or [On the Bus Company] and I think it might've had stables on it and nothing else much. I've never seen a photograph of it before that building was put up.

Anyway they tendered out to have the building built and I think there were about 11 tenderers and they took the cheapest one, I know that. It's a wooden framed building, it's very impressive building in its own right. But it did have problems in later years because it wasn't a concrete or a metal framed building and under fire regulations the owners in later years had to put in extra stairwells and things. But as the years went on they built another office building next door to that over the little lane that's in Victoria Street and then a garage further up and then there was other buildings in the street.

Then on the other side right up to Nicholson Street - [that's your] street here, just further down here - was the butter factory and other businesses that were all operations for the business.

Facilitator 2: Oh, so they were all cooperated?

Peter Williams: Well it was all part of the one show, it was all Moran & Cato's.

[11:44]

Facilitator 2: Even the butter.

Peter Williams: Yeah, yeah they packed butter. They were one of the biggest handlers of butter and cheese in Victoria before the Kraft Foods company came along. In fact up into



the 1950s Moran & Cato's handled more cheese than the Kraft Foods company did. Now the operation from there was very big because the branches gradually grew from one to 10 to 20 to 30 to 40 and even by the 1890s there were over 50 branches.

Facilitator 2: Was that all over Victoria or just in Melbourne?

Peter Williams: Melbourne and parts of Victoria that were worthwhile, and you established them in the country areas close to railway lines because of the logistics of handling produce and stuff. They had wagons to deliver to all the branches and there were so many horses - there were over 200 horses stalled at North Fitzroy in stables down there and the horses ate so much fodder over the years they bought the Northcote [Hay &] Fodder company.

[Laughter]

Yeah, different days to what we have today, aren't they? You've got...

Facilitator: So where were the horses in North Fitzroy, Peter?

Peter Williams: Was it Holden Street, or up that end. I've got the photographs of the building there, the stable buildings and things, and they were photographed in the 1900s and I've got those in there, family records, not the horse stalls inside but there are all these wagons. They were four wheeled wagons pulled by horses, they even had a refrigerated wagon that was painted white and the trademark was a polar bear, Arctic, on the side of it and with ice block for delivery of products that were cold around and that survived, that photograph, which is marvellous.[13:36]

Then of course motor vehicles came in and they had their own plant down there in Victoria Street for servicing their own vehicles and so forth. It was a very in house operation that was very successful in its time. My father joined the firm way back in the late '20s and my grandfather was still there until he died just at the outbreak of the Second World War.

Facilitator: So your father became an employee? Or a shareholder?

Peter Williams: Yes, he was an employee and shareholder. Like many other - dad was on the financial side of the business, cashier and so forth and he was very, very smart on figures I can tell you, adding up figures and a very neat writer too. Mr Skidmore was the office manager there for many years, he'd started in 1881 or 1882 and he was there until he retired. He had a number of sons who lived in Ivanhoe, and the house is still there, who there was only one survivor, Bob Skidmore. The others



were all lost in the First World War. I think he had three sons and three of them were lost, tragic things that happen in these terrible wars and that sort of thing.

Facilitator: So the workload for the business and your father...

Peter Williams: Yes, and even in the First World War M&C's provided the Navy and the Army with supplies, food supplies and Rosella had a lot of house brands too, like Waratah, Picnic, Rono, Clipper, they handled everything with house brands. A lot of people think in the grocery world today this is a new thing, it wasn't, they were doing it 120 years ago and they even had exercise books for the children. Moran & Cato's exercise books with their advertisement on the back cover and all that sort of thing.

They specialised in tea and they reckon that one third of all the tea sold in Victoria came from M&C's and it was packed in, bought in from estates from overseas, blended at Fitzroy because - people in [16:01] recent years have said oh blended tea's no good, well tea came in various qualities. It's an art in itself for colour, consistency and in later years, when ladies wanted to buy tea you bought it in the packet and you expect that this week will be the same as last week, et cetera, et cetera. So they specialised in that. Before that a lot of tea was variable and it came out of canisters that were in the stores with just numbers on them.

But Tom Moran and Fred were pretty smart, that in the shops they put behind the counter, a bit like when you go into a McDonald's today, you look up and you see what they've got to sell like the hamburgers. They put their name on the tins running along the shelf at eye level, M-o-r-a-n and an ampersand C-a-t-o. So when you were in the shop those tea tins were immediately above the counter behind the person serving you, so it was good advertising. It was usually dip it out, put it into a brown paper bag or something like that and that's how you bought half a pound of tea or a pound of tea.

The other thing that M&C's were very good at in the tea business - and they eclipsed the other people by miles on this one - they bought also all grades of tea from lower grades to the middle grade to the very top, most expensive tea that you could buy in the world. They packed some of the best genuine teas anywhere in Melbourne here. Forget about the London ones because they picked it up and brought it on the return trips from Melbourne to England and they adulterated it up like Twinings with flavourings, you don't need to do that with genuine tea.

When Ceylon Tea was launched - because what actually happened, Ceylon in the 1870s grew coffee, didn't grow tea at all and they got a bug in the coffee plants



and it wiped it out. So they went looking for cuttings of tea to plant them in Ceylon but it took a couple of years for it to happen. Because tea was grown nationally in China and brought to Melbourne, Indian tea was brought in from parts of Assam and so forth and it was used for colouring in the tea blends.[18:37]

Because when you put milk into China tea it turned a bit grey looking and Assam tea with the tannin colouring gave it a better look, so that's what the average housewife wanted.

Gradually the idea of packing tea into packets as we know it came in. My grandfather was instrumental in bringing that system with the firm into Melbourne and they were the first firm to actually have a machine that physically made the packet from a roll of paper. Printed rolls and formed up and that's round - I've just forgotten what year it was, it was just about the First World War period and certainly just after the First World War it was in full flight and they were packing tea down there. They also had steam engines and everything in Fitzroy here with generating plants so if the power went off they had their own power.

It was like MacRobertson's, it was a very well organised firm. Because of the steam involvement of my grandfather and his interests in wireless and steam when Macpherson Robertson decided to rebuild a lot of his rather smallish little factories all together under White City - the two families, Moran's, Cato's, Williams' and the [Boric's] all knew each other - and my grandfather put up a lot of the original plans for the design of White City, that the power station was in the centre of the complex and the pipes went out to the various sections. He wasn't a confectioner, but he was an engineer. So there's lots of interesting connections with it all.

I started to visit, naturally, after the war, after my father came back from the Air Force end of 1946. He was away because he was in a design and survey unit and handled real estate. It was a very small unit and that RAAF had taken over a lot of properties, houses, mansions in Toorak and all over the place and dad had an office at the end of the war at Reeds at Prahran down in Chapel Street that's now Pran Central and it had an office at one stage at the Exhibition Buildings too. Because all of these places in Melbourne were taken over during the war.[21:11]

His team went around with others valuing the damage before the properties were handed back, and this applied to shipping too, all of the troop ships, half of them were passenger boats that all had to be reconverted after the war. But there



would have been good business from the grocery here in Fitzroy to the shipping companies in supplying - they weren't the only supplier, as I mentioned - but they also supplied very handsome quantities to the Victorian Railways.

There was always one wagon or one truck backwards and forwards to Spencer Street for all the supplies for the Spirit of Progress and the other Sydney trains and country trains. They did very good business in that respect because one of the family members married into the chief commissioner's family [laughs] of the Victorian Railways and I guess that like a lot of things it's a network. Sometimes people you know and you can help them and so forth.

But it was a very strict and well run business, very much on Methodist principles and if you were seen regularly at a hotel or at the races you were lucky to have a job on Monday morning. The joke was, in our family, that if those redundancies had to be paid out my father was one of the sackers in the business I suppose that did that, but if there was two shillings a week rise, or five shillings a week rise, dad had to tell them to go and see Mr Cato [laughs]. I mean...

But I used to go down at school holidays, to Brunswick Street, and then sometimes into the warehouse or see other people. But I didn't work there, but [Ann Blayney] who wrote a book on Fred Cato - it was published about 15 or 18 years ago - she got a few things wrong, she didn't listen very carefully to what I told her. There's a photograph there in that book showing employees and family members at a function at [Kewarra] at Auburn, the old house there, there would've been 250 people at the function.

The table in the front has got my grandfather and my grandmother and the Cato boys and Mrs Moran, Elizabeth, all in the front of [23:54] the picture there. But Ann put in the book that - she mentioned my name - I worked for the firm, I never really worked for the firm, I didn't have to work for the firm.

I visited as a schoolboy and did odd jobs I suppose, but never got paid a cent for obvious reasons, might've been more trouble than I was worth you never know in those days. Then of course a few years later the business of self-service came in and M&C was a little bit slow in getting into that. Because they were number one grocery chain at that time by miles they thought that perhaps it didn't need to happen. But they were a little slow in getting into self-service but they had a lot of very, very good stores.

They produced a house magazine - which I've got the full set of - after the war in a bound volume with all the photographs, all the branches and people running them



and so forth. Wedding photographs, the whole lot, were put into house magazines. They then changed the business from proprietary limited into a second board public company, a small one, in the early '50s and that's where the trouble started I think. Because the moment you do that and you get a little bit of extra money in from outside you're starting to work for the shareholders those shareholders, people you're not really sure of and who you don't know and I don't think that went down very, very well.

But the big mistake was made in later years when one of dad's great friends who I think also went to Ivanhoe Grammar School, George McCann who was involved with Myer Emporium, we used to supply the majority of grocery to Myer's grocery in Lonsdale Street. Never very successful because people just didn't buy grocery in the city block. There weren't grocers there and you opened and closed and Bourke Street was difficult, they had a shop in Bourke Street, another one further down near Elizabeth Street.

But there was only one or two successful grocers in later years in the city block, Wilson's, but they were licensed grocers. M&C's[26:19] never sold liquor. That's right, and now people live in the city and they buy grocery, they didn't. In the earlier days [unclear] were pretty smart in putting shops where there was a run of cable trams near the stops for people to take their groceries home because they were reasonably heavy, tins of jam and things like that. With the cable tram set up of 1886 onwards right throughout Melbourne a lot of the shops were very strategically placed with cable trams.

They also placed them very strategically near a post office or in the centre of a shopping centre, never anything less than seven or eight shops in a group, it wasn't worth the effort because that wasn't a centre. So you picked streets like Brunswick Street, Smith Street. Chapel Street was a disaster always, because it was - in the early days they've reported in their minutes and their diaries and things - that it was a cutting street. Nobody made any money in Chapel Street, everybody was trying to undercut somebody else more and you got shops like the ones at Footscray which were very, very good shops, and Richmond.

Facilitator: [Porters].

Peter Williams: Yeah, even against them and Bruns-, all the inner areas were very, very good and then there were the country areas and so forth. But all areas and all retailing has its ups and downs but what happened then you can't compare to today, it's a different world totally today. But with all the products and so forth until the offer



that came after the second board from Permewan Wright who wanted to extend their business who were mainly in the country area, and they used to do a bit of carrying too. [28:18]

Permewan Wright were bringing onions and potatoes in and all those sorts of things which, carry things. Sir John Allison I think his name was was the chairman there in the '60s, he wanted to get into the grocery business. Coles really were still a variety store and Woolworths, it was also the same, weren't terribly successful in grocery in Victoria at all.

Woolworths was a stolen name, full stop, from FW Woolworth in dime stores in America. A couple of fellows went across from Sydney, saw the name there and they thought that Woolworths might extend to Australia, mainly Sydney, so they registered the name before they did and then started variety stores. Coles, who were pretty small at that stage in the early '20s, moved to Smith Street as we all know with a store with nothing over two and six pence. But still selling mousetraps and fly spray and all sorts of general things, and a few groceries but not much, they weren't grocers at all.

Both formed public companies but it was other people's money that pushed those, but Woolworths was never successful until more recent times, and I mean the last 30 odd years, in Victoria. The independents and the local chains were the ones that dominated the whole thing. It was more in recent times that Coles got going again because they could see the amount of money going through cash register and they went out purposely when they went into the public area of big money, tapping into superannuation funds, of buying other grocery chains with money and SE Dickens was one of those from Geelong that had a group of stores.

Mrs Holt, the wife of the prime minister, her father was SE Dickens and that's where the money came from there. But Coles and the others went into the marketplace to buy smaller chains to get into the food business and that's how it gradually grew. At that stage while they were growing M&C's were going the other way a little bit, certainly by the mid-1960s anyway.

Facilitator 2: So when you recall going there as a schoolboy... [30:55]

Peter Williams: That was about the history of M&C, this is not my history.

Facilitator 2: Yeah, so you're sort of talking about I guess the late '40s?

Peter Williams: Yes, the late '40s and very early '50s.



Facilitator 2: Yeah, and what sort of people did they employ? Like did they employ local people?

Peter Williams: Well this was an interesting thing. The employment registers show people that naturally lived in areas close to where they worked in shops. Managers quite often lived in the residence above, that certainly was the case in the very early days, and then the problems were in the Second World War with so many men being called up a lot of the wives of the men had been called up, called into the shops to become shop assistants.

I think there was 642 or 645 men enlisted from Moran & Cato's in World War Two and the big brass plaque was in the office down there at Victoria Street for many years. We gave that to the War Memorial in Canberra. I don't know why, I think I should've had it melted down and the money given to the Salvation Army, but nevertheless it's almost the same number as were lost in the cruiser Sydney by a couple. That's a very large number from one business enlisting in World War Two. Not necessarily all from Fitzroy, but a great number of people did live there.

Of course as the years went on - my grandfather was actually in those earlier days living in Clifton Hill and a lot of houses in Clifton Hill didn't have a driveway or a garage to put a motorcar. He was lucky enough, like the others in the business, to be able to own a motorcar, certainly in the late 1900s and so forth.

He bought land and a house out at Darebin, Merton Street near Ivanhoe Grammar School and that's why my father went to the school there first. They moved from Clifton Hill out there and they had a quarter acre block with a garage and everything, they were very lucky and it wasn't so very far along Heidelberg Road into Fitzroy. [33:10]

That was the case with a lot of the shoe manufacturers in Fitzroy and Collingwood. You'll find that quite a lot of them, the Sharwoods and other families, lived in Ivanhoe.

It became a little unfashionable if you were in business to perhaps live in Fitzroy for one reason or another, it wasn't exactly the flavour of the month suburb if you were in business to physically live there and MacPherson and Robertson was exactly the same.

Facilitator 2: What sort of people can you remember living - like, when you came down...



Peter Williams: It was a tough area in the 1940s and '50s and I can remember the big thing in the papers - and I don't know how a schoolboy remembers this - was slum parents in Melbourne. It was the big political issue after the war of parts of Richmond, Collingwood, Fitzroy and the inner areas and there's no doubt that it had to happen. It did happen, as you know, with mass demolition and acquisition of blocks and all that sort of thing and it was done I think in good faith. But in hindsight you probably wouldn't do it that way today with the blocks of developments in Brunswick Street up there, the Methodist Church going in that area.

But something had to be done without doubt in those inner areas. Kensington, parts of that weren't quite so bad, but parts of South Melbourne were pretty bad too.

Facilitator 2: I mean given their connections can you remember how the family felt about the church and the hall and that going?

Peter Williams: Didn't think anything of it but I'm sure that somebody would've thought that it wasn't obviously attracting a big congregation and it must've dropped off by the '60s. You were more, I guess, keeping a business going at that time. Business wasn't easy to run after the war, there was no money, money had to be sought and products were very hard to get, things were still very scarce right up until 1960 period. It was not an easy time.

[35:42]

But with the other development Myers, Mr McCann, I remember him coming over to our house one Sunday morning and he said to my father, Bill, he said I've seen a great idea in America, he said, I went there. He said, the retailers don't operate in a street, they own the suburb. What do you mean? Well he said, they do a development on a block of land and that creates a new suburb. Well that grew to Chadstone, the block of land beside the convent there.

The idea was to have the Myer store on the end of the block closest to the road as the anchor and an alleyway or an arcade with various small shops running down and the grocery of Moran & Cato's at the other end. That was a big mistake, total big mistake in the history of M&C's and the board just didn't like the idea that their landlord, and Myer would be the landlord in this particular case, knew exactly what went through their cash registers and they chickened out and didn't sign the documents, just a night or so before they were signed.



Then there was a bit of a lull for a moment and they offered it to Coles after that, and that was a big mistake at that particular time. Then of course Chadstone - Myers got into trouble with Chadstone in later years, too, and really had to offer it for sale. They weren't watching the maintenance of the building and lots of other things and they put it on the market and that's how Gambles got their hands on it in later years. So it's a revolving door, isn't it, of success. But that was my connection with there.

But I used to come down to Fitzroy here because there was a - also with my father - my grandmother was a business lady and she had theatre shops, she had lots and lots of them. The ones that ran selling the ice creams and all the things at picture shows and so forth. At one stage she had many, many of them and one of the best, if not the best, was The Grand Theatre in Paisley Street in Footscray. You could sell anything in Footscray after the war. [See] there as a lot of overtime and people went to the pictures there. [38:13]

But there were a couple of manufacturers like MacRobertson's still where we used to sell all their chocolates through the shops. They were the bestselling ones, not Cadbury's, MacRobertson was the leading brand by miles and Cadbury's could never crack MacRobertson until later years.

There was also a potato chip manufacturer and I can remember going down in a shop front somewhere in Brunswick Street or Smith Street where they packed potato chips that became one of the well-known brands like Colvan or something later on. They fried all the chips and put them out and the ladies would hand pack them into the packets and seal them. Dad would have to pick up - because they were so short, all of these things, and at lots of little firms through Fitzroy and down this way here that sold lots of little food products. They're nearly all gone now and manufactured...

Facilitator: Were rents relatively cheap at that time around here?

Peter Williams: No, it was just - I think because it was where things were done and even I think if you look at Richard Pratt, who was a friend of mine in later years, because I - the Kraft company, the famous cardboard family, Visy Board - started in this immediate area, there were lots of little box manufacturers and shoeboxes.

A lot of those were bench work, all made by hand by ladies sitting at tables like this doing things. It went right through this area and MacRobertson employed a lot of people doing bench work in boxes and things like that. Didn't have great big machines making all of these things at all and that's where Richard Pratt's father



started. But I knew him through grocery and the Kraft company because when I started there Visy Board were just one of many people in that business, one of many cabs on the rank. They weren't the only one by a long shot, they weren't the biggest either. [40:11]

I'd ring Visy Board on behalf of my boss, he'd say get the rep from Visy Board we want a competitive quote down and I'd speak to Mr Pratt and he'd say, I'll send Richard down to see you. Well he was about a year older than I was but we were very similar in age group and I had a very good relationship with him for many, many years, which is completely separate from Fitzroy because they were out at...

Facilitator: But your mother's shops were around Fitzroy?

Peter Williams: The theatre shops, she had them - my grandmother - had them at the Roxy at Brooklyn, the Sun at Yarraville, the owner's family were related on my mother's side of the family. The Northcote at Northcote they had, and quite a few of the others. Of course they went in and out of these businesses a little bit, but she was one of Sennett's Ice Creams largest customers. She was so good a business lady they would deliver on Sunday mornings to her which is almost unheard of. Mrs JL Wilkes always paid in cash, very important.

Facilitator 2: You talked about the printers as well.

[short break]

Facilitator: We'll start now, so yeah, just tell us a little bit about that.

Peter Williams: Well Meg, you asked me about Ackman's and I went to that talk at the Fitzroy Library, is it 12 months or 18 months ago?

Facilitator: Oh yes, probably 18 months.

Peter Williams: Yes, and it surprised me that there was virtually nobody in the audience of a group of about 30 that realised that that site in Smith Street which is now a Woolworths Supermarket, was in fact a major printing business. One of Melbourne's top, biggest printing businesses for many, many years. Of course it's a rather [42:20] strange sort of façade on that building, that it's been totally rebuilt behind the façade.

Somebody in the heritage world when that building was being demolished kept the front. It looks like a set out of a theatre, it's really a bit of a joke. I mean, historically buildings have to change and they will, there's no point in keeping that



façade in my opinion though I'm interested in history, but they have. But if you go back and you look at early photographs Ackman's was a major player in the furniture business and they weren't the only one in Melbourne. They were certainly one of the earlier ones and they started off right back in the early days.

I took some notes out and you might be interested to know that in 1877 at least there was a Mr Henry Ackman and he operated as a pawn broker in this area and his address was 101 Smith Street, later the numbers were changed and that was midway between Gertrude Street and Webb Street on the west side. He moved a couple of times and by 1884 he was at 109 Smith Street and then he's got 109 to 11. By 1886 he's still there as a pawn broker but obviously handling a little bit of furniture or something like that, he's next door to the Stanford Block which is still there in Smith Street, not where they were in later years.

But certainly by the mid to late 1880s he's getting interested in furniture and on the corner of Hodgson Street which was 221 to 223 there was a business called [Clawson and Foley] in furniture and by the late 1880s he's on that site. It appears to me from the research that I've done that the street numbers were altered between about 1887 and 1888. Now that would need confirmation, but at least 22 numbers were put in somewhere along that southern end and that confuses you when you're doing historical research unless you've got absolute photographs all in front of you.

But by 1889 the corner of Smith Street which was really Ackman's later on is number 243, the corner of Hodgson Street is 243.[45:20] He occupied that site as a furniture dealer 1890s right up until 1939. He also had another shop in Flinders Street in the city there at 250. So I don't know how big that is but that number, 250, would be somewhere down near Ball & Welch I would think, or it might be in the next block further down there where Mutual Stores were.

But the building in 1940 was vacant, that site of Ackman's, the supermarket site, and in 1941 the name of Ackman's is associated with Foy's for a very short period it becomes Foy Ackman's and they were at 133 Smith Street which is the site of the current ex Foy and Gibson Buildings with the new numberings. In 1941 a printing and carton business called Morris & Walker that had originally been in Flinders Lane in the city, about 31, 35 Flinders Lane, took the site and actually bought it and then expanded over the whole block. Their number...

Facilitator: Including the hotel?



Peter Williams: Yes that had been demolished, probably when Ackman's built their bigger building, the hotel disappeared. I think it was called the Shepherds Hotel or something like that in the earlier days. But 1946 Morris & Walker occupied the whole block. Where they were very interesting is they were doing litho printing, they had an art department, they had a graining section there for doing litho blocks of stone, they were doing cartons and printers and for the Kraft Foods company that I was with they were one of four and then one of six suppliers of the Kraft blue packet, half pound cheese packets.

We had the contract spread through a number of printers because we were packing three quarters of a million packets a week of eight ounce Kraft cheese in the 1950s. You couldn't afford to have a supplier burn down, go out of business, you had to have all the backup ones all the time. Morris & Walker were one of those with John H Savage's and Containers Limited and so forth.

In that building they did the first run for Rowntree's I think it was of Smarties, and the run of those packets I think was 10 million [48:09] packets or something, boxes for Smarties when they were introduced in the early 1950s. You know those little round coloured things?

Facilitator: Allens Confectionery, was it?

Peter Williams: No it wasn't in those days, Allens weren't as big. I think it was Hoadley's or Rowntree's...

Facilitator: Rowntree's.

Peter Williams: ...that brought out Smarties at the time. But Morris & Walker occupied that site. By 1950 they were very big in the printing world and they put the new doorway on the corner of Hodgson Street there with a slogan over the top of it, the doorway to good packaging, and a nice presentable entrance to a factory. The trucks and other things used the back section of the business and along the frontage to Smith Street were a number of smaller shops that had nothing to do with the business but they leased the space.

There was one of them, and I can't think of the name of it, in later years that was a retailer that was an American company that was there for a very, very short while. But most of the employees in that building, or the majority of them, lived in Fitzroy but the sales manager was a very nice fellow called Hugh [Dunbar] and his son [Graham] Dunbar later became the sales manager there and the Morris family ran it, the Walkers had disappeared at this stage.



I suspected the Walker was part of an earlier printing business in Melbourne called Walker [Mays] that went back into the 19th century, but I'm not really 100 per cent certain of it. But they had done very, very well, Morris & Walker, and old Mr Morris had bought a lot of shares in APM in the 1900s so he became a very comfortable shareholder in the paper business. They were doing cartons because that was their business and then show cards for the grocery business and anything else that you could print. Not very selective, you took anything you could get.

[50:28]

They had an art department and the fellow that ran it had been a stamp designer in Europe before he came here and very well known, either Hungary or one of those European countries.

Facilitator: Is that where the cylinders developed?

Peter Williams: No, no but they did in that building develop a spirally wound tubes, that's what we were talking of, cylinders, yes. It started off with the spirally wound tubes were first used in some food products. Now Morris & Walker's weren't the first to do these, Moran & Cato's actually put custard powder into some of the very first of these tubes ever made in Victoria in the early 1920s I believe, with metal tops and bottoms and that sort of thing.

But Morris & Walker expanded and during the war they produced these marvellous big cylinders that would've been about 15 inches in diameter or more and probably standing about four foot tall as supply bombs that were used by the Allies and other people with a metal sharp end and a parachute and they could be dropped for troops and other things. They did very well and [Rolly] Morris who was the managing director had one of these in the corner of his office which was on the first floor on that Hodgson Street corner right above the doorway because I can remember it there.

That part of the business expanded to Formatubes for the building industry and everything else and then to [Pack Pacific Corporation] for themselves. They stayed on that site there as far as I can remember doing business with them until about 1967-68 when they moved to Dougharty Road in West Heidelberg. It was a modern facility there on a flat area and the older building had been a combination of older parts of a building that had been makeshift more than a specially designed and built building on the same level. They moved out there.

Facilitator: St David Street would've gone straight through to Gore, so would've Hodgkinson Street, so...



Peter Williams: Yes, they're one ways now, aren't they? [52:50]

Facilitator: They're dead ends.

Peter Williams: They're dead ends, are they?

Mm, well they sold that building and when they formed Pack Pacific Corporation Morris & Walker's name disappeared and then Pack Pacific, Rolly Morris decided to sell out and I'm just not sure who the next owners were. It might've been ACI. That building, after they vacated in the late '60s had a number of different names associated with it. There was Gaiety Toys, [Leda] Products and other things like that. There seems to have been some sort of plastic works in there doing conversion work. I doubt if they'd be making plastics but probably converting plastic stuff there and that's about what I know about that particular building.

Then it became vacant and of course was an attraction for a developer to demolish and that's where the supermarket business came in. From that meeting most of the people remember the problems associated with the redevelopment of the site. I wasn't interested in it, neither were the Morris family, they'd gone altogether.

Facilitator: Yes, and many of the local residents current were activists in trying to contain that development. Because I believe the grand plan was to have access to the building from Gore Street from the residential side and their argument was it shouldn't. But we're hoping to interview somebody about that...

Peter Williams: Mm, Roland Morris lived in Toorak actually, he bought a house owned by the Rockmans in Trawalla Avenue and from there they moved down to Mornington to retire. But in the family there were a few little problems and - it's not perhaps for this meeting - but Peter and his sister were twins and there was an older brother, Rolly, who [54:54] had a few medical problems and so forth and Rolly couldn't have taken over the business. Peter was more interested in other things and went to England to pursue other things there and his sister, when she married, her new husband was involved in the business.

Then they, Pack Pacific which grew into a very big business, had another plant which they established - they couldn't have done it in Fitzroy - out at Templestowe Road Bulleen, just near Heide Art Gallery, just a bit further around opposite where the brickworks were and that was Pack Pacific Corporation. But that's a few details on that particular site. But Ackman's was certainly one of the big names in



Melbourne in furniture before the days of Patersons and, or Maples was pretty early too, they would've been competitors with Maples.

Facilitator: Yes, and you mentioned before Clauscen's.

Peter Williams: Clauscen's was one of the earlier ones again and he was one of the early people that was the big wigs in Fitzroy and if you see his name on the foundation stone of the town hall.

Facilitator: Mm, and Clauscen Street and...

Peter Williams: Yeah, Clauscen Street and there was Clauscen's in Bourke Street in the city near Malcolm Reid's there, a building for many, many years. It was because of that that I sort of took an interest in early Fitzroy when the book was produced there, is it the Cutten Trust? Produced it and ...I was just helpful in a very minor, minor way with something to do with that and I went to the launch there and created more interest for myself in early Fitzroy. My sister when she married a fellow called Keith Wiegard who was involved with Fitzroy Football Club, after they got married they lived in a development in King William Street [56:51] in some flats there. My father was horrified about it at the time, living in Fitzroy, but they later moved from there to other parts of Mount Eliza and Doncaster and so forth. But nevertheless that's the way it goes, isn't it.

Facilitator: Yeah, very expensive apartments now.

Peter Williams: Yeah, it was a development somewhere down not far from where we are now. Just down the street here, or up the street, down the street. But I used to visit a marvellous little place not far from where we are down the end of the street near the convent there, it was called The Old Curiosity Shop. Now this might be of interest to you.

...It's part of a development that's behind the convent down there in the street and it was owned by one of two brothers and was called Duncan's Curiosity Shop. One brother had that shop, the other had a shop in the Eastern Market when I was a schoolboy, this is just after the war. I used to go into the Eastern Market in the city, the entrance was off Exhibition Street just back from the corner of Bourke Street. There was Mr Walker the stamp dealer had the first two shops linked together and Duncan was the next one.

If you bought anything from Mr Duncan he closed the door afterwards and I think he toddled off to the hotel across the road on the corner of Bourke Street soon



after. My father knew about this shop because my dad collected swords and interesting things, he wasn't a major collector or anything like that, and the best things always hung on the back of the door when you opened it for this little shop. He had all these marvellous curiosities in the window there, things that had been collected in Egypt on P&O boats and things that had come out in the 19th century like heads of mummies and things like that. All interesting things. [58:57]

But they had an auction sale in the 1950s up there at this little cottage and the brother that owned that one had an ink well and desk set that belonged to Melba and lots of other fascinating things. There's a wonderful catalogue of it and there's an etching, have you seen that ...from a historical point of view? Of The Old Curiosity Shop? It's either by John Shirlow or one of the famous etchers of 1920s and it's reproduced on the cover of the catalogue of the sale. I think [Decorations or Lemmon Jolles], it might've been Decorations that handled the sale, because I went there to the sale as a young fellow.

I've got a feeling there was a copy of that etching in another antique shop that was in Gertrude Street down here on a corner, on the right hand corner. It's now a restaurant there to - not Gore Street, it's one of the other streets that runs back to Victoria Parade. It was called something diner for a short while there.

You know the one I mean?

Facilitator: Yes, it's called...

Peter Williams: They have some interesting material in there because my car used to stop automatically at second hand shops [laughs], just to have a look sometimes. But that's a little part of earlier Fitzroy that I used to visit. But as a young fellow at school you didn't have any money in your pocket, you were all interested and you could see but you couldn't touch. That's part of my other association with early Fitzroy.

A curious little thing with M&C is I mentioned the motorcars. Very few employees in the business had motorcars except the owners[60:48] of the business and the general manager in my grandfather's time of that site was a man called Timms, his son was Robert Timms that later the coffee. Robert was a pretty sharp tack, he'd come in with a fancy tie, dad said, into the office and people would remark and say oh, Bob, you've blocked us, bright tie, or very fancy tie, and he'd turn around and say, would you like to buy it?

[Laughter]



Everything was for sale. By a strange coincidence in later years Elizabeth Timms did an art course with myself at the RMIT and at that stage Bobby Timms had a coffee business he'd started in A'Beckett Street in the city, but Elizabeth and I were great friends. I don't know what ultimately happened to her, she got married I suppose but these sort of things happen. But my dad was the only person in the office whilst he was connected with the financial side, he had a desk, and the status symbol was a big desk with a glass top on it and he always liked that, that people came to see you and all that sort of thing.

But he had a little Austin 7 car. Rather than leave it always in the company garage with his father's car, et cetera, and Mr Moran's car or Mr Cato's car and so forth dad had this Austin 7. He had a chain and a padlock and he used to padlock it to a lamppost outside the office in Victoria Street because in the 1920s and early '30s this area was full of kids that were out of control and they'd pick the car up and move it somewhere. So he had to padlock it to a lamppost, could you imagine that happening today? That's just a little humorous sideline.

But in the depression years things were very, very grim in Fitzroy and Collingwood and at the warehouse door in Victoria Street there - my father was involved with this - they would hand out to the needy people that would queue up at 5:30 and 6:00 o'clock at night damaged product or product that was surplus to needs or something like that to try and help people. They were not oblivious to the situation, it was a desperate situation. [63:22]

In the desperate time of the major depression in 1930 or '31 Fred Cato wrote cheques one afternoon for £100,000 in that office for distribution to charities and things around Melbourne. We all hear of Sidney Myer giving lots of money away, but he liked a lot of things with his name tacked on it afterwards. Fred Cato was very, very genuine. But £100,000 was given away in cheques in a very, very short period of time which was very serious money for those days. I think that might've been half my inheritance, and the others', it certainly would've gone a long way.

But he was a very astute bean keeper too, I can assure you, because I've got the financial papers going right back. In the First World War, that business one year alone made £70,000 profit, I think 1916 or '17, and that was pretty serious money. Over and above all the other costs and the worries of World War One. But you only have these things when you've got the actual paperwork that you can check it up on. Anyway.

END OF TRANSCRIPT