



Living history

How shops show their age

Niagara Café, Gundagai

Shop fronts are an important part of our shopping heritage. They contribute to the distinctive feel of a street, marking the ebb and flow of the town's fortunes and fashions and providing shoppers with familiar landmarks and a sense of the past. Remodelled in the 1930s, the Niagara Café shows the distinctive influence of the art moderne style – curved glass, terrazzo tiles and bold stylised lettering. *Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.*

Shops are part of the history of European settlement in Australia. Many shops have special importance as part of our shared heritage.

Some shops have not changed a great deal since they first opened their doors, and their physical features reveal a lot about the way people bought and sold goods and services in a particular place and era.

Others hold a special place in the life of a community - somewhere to meet, or a familiar touchstone in times of change.

Some shops are associated with the history of different cultural groups, including the many thousands of migrants who arrived after World War II. Many established a foothold in their new country by opening shops, and ushered into their communities a whole new world of social customs, foods and languages.

And some are traditional shops, where the skills or old ways of doing things have been kept alive over several generations.

Many things contribute to our understanding of the history of retailing: the way a shop was built, location, layout, the way spaces were used, movable items like chairs, counters, shelving, display cabinets, cash registers, weighing equipment, signs and store records,

and the stories and traditions associated with the shop. All of these are a part of our cultural heritage.

Most shops in city and metropolitan areas have been altered and modernised, and it is the movable objects - items such as equipment and furniture - that are usually discarded along the way.

Nevertheless, there are still some survivors, an increasingly rare and precious group that represents the very essence of our shopping heritage. Most are likely to be found in country areas, where they carry on amidst fluctuating economic conditions and changing shopping habits.

The owners have often been there since the shop began, or have continued to run their family's business. The future of these shops is often uncertain. In some cases, new owners have embraced an ageing shop's history, and found its authenticity to be an asset. Undoubtedly, many people delight in finding a shop that is more than just a place to select, pay and exit as quickly as possible.

This chapter explores some measures of a shop's heritage.

The shop front

The character of a particular street or locality sets it apart from any other place, and a town that has a range of shop fronts, reflecting different eras and fashions, is an interesting place to visit and shop. These shop fronts become landmarks of changing fashions and fortunes. They are an important part of the history and streetscape of a place.

Many suburban streets and country towns still retain shop fronts in styles that were popular in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In older shopping streets, the verandahs or awnings, signs, entrances, tile finishes, scale and design of the windows, even the entry porch, all represent a time capsule of changing styles and fashions.

Shop fronts are also the public face of the shops that lie behind the facades. In many cases, the architectural detail of the shop front might be all that is left intact after the shop itself has been gutted. Intact shop fronts are still an important part of retailing history. They add to the flavour of their street, and are often part of our architectural heritage as well.

Many shops have retained their original glossy tiles, sometimes with ornate motifs or colourful borders. Some have timber or brass window framing, a tiled entry porch, double timber doors. A shop that still has solid timber, or perhaps frosted glass panels behind the window display area, is also likely to have an original or early shop front, and possibly interior fixtures and fittings.

By keeping this diversity of shop fronts as a marker of our history, communities are making a statement about the character of the locality, and what they value from their past.



Main Street, Braidwood

Historic shopping streets are undergoing a revival as traditional or innovative small businesses offer an alternative to the one-stop shopping experience of large regional shopping centres. Country towns such as Braidwood have successfully capitalised on the historical architecture and character of their shop fronts.

Photograph by Gillian Mottram.



Verandah, Up-To-Date Store, Coolamon

Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.



Feature tiles, Short's Butcher Shop, Narromine

Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.



**Window blinds featuring advertising,
Finn's Old Store, Canowindra**

Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.



**Window display and glass panels,
Coolac General Store**

Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.



Tiled entry porch, pharmacy, Mudgee

Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.



**Signs on front window, The House of Quality,
Boorowa**

Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.

‘Are you being served?’

Customer service and shop layout

We can learn a great deal about a shop’s history, and the way that the business has been conducted over time, by examining the layout of the interior.

The typical general store in the late-nineteenth century, for example, featured a deep narrow shop floor, high ceiling and skylights or small windows set high along each wall. There was usually a long timber counter along one or both sides of the shop and timber shelves lining the wall behind the counter. Stock was sometimes stacked behind the counter, to be brought out when a customer required a particular item. In some shops, there was a general atmosphere of clutter, with items suspended from the ceiling and displayed on tables or in boxes in the centre of the shop.

There are many shops that still look like this, revealing how business was conducted in an earlier era. Many general stores and drapers’ shops, for example, can be found with a timber counter and shelving extending along one or both sides of the shop. There might also be timber or metal and glass display cabinets, and tables or racks of merchandise placed strategically around the shop floor.

General stores during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries were usually highly organised – everything had its place. Different types of merchandise were grouped together – haberdashery, fabric and clothing on one side, food items on the other and hardware at the rear of the shop. Some shops kept perishable foods like hams in a cellar or cool room. Dry goods such as flour were often dispensed from hopper bins under the counter and kept secure from vermin.

In larger shops, shoppers may have been greeted by a store floorwalker, who ensured that his customers were comfortably seated on a Bentwood chair before ushering in a sales assistant and closely supervising her standard of service. Customers would be given personalised service and their particular needs discussed, negotiated, weighed, measured and paid for at the counter. This might also have been the place for exchange of news or gossip. In some older shops it still is!

When the practice of self-service and cash-and-carry shopping gained momentum between the two world wars, customers were encouraged to select their purchases from island counters arranged across the shop floor, then move to a central cash register to complete their transactions. This new style of retailing was spelt out in the physical layout of the store, and is the layout that most shoppers will be familiar with today.

By looking closely at the layout of the shop floor, we can read tell-tale signs about where it fits into the history of retailing. It provides a window to the history of shopping in our society, and is as important as the shop front in our shopping heritage.



Coolac General Store

This traditional country general store is still run along the lines of the original universal provider, supplying everything from food to hardware, farm equipment and stockfeed to the local farming community. It has a general air of busyness and clutter, but everything has its place. *Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.*



Brennan and Geraghty's General Store Museum, Maryborough

Intact general stores like this are significant because they show how the shop operated as a complex made up of different buildings and workspaces. This store complex, dating from 1871, occupies two allotments and includes the store building, mature figs and palms probably planted by the original family, split post and rail fences and a stable building. There is also a cottage that was moved to the site in 1896, and a residence built in 1904. The store layout indicates how goods were moved about via a trolley system, and a raised office enabled the store manager to keep an eye on the shop floor. *Photograph courtesy of National Trust of Queensland.*

Behind the scenes

There is more to a historic shop than meets the eye! Behind the shop front, beyond the shop floor, there may be other rooms and spaces that can tell us more about the shop's history and the way it functioned.

Behind the scenes there were often areas dedicated to aspects of retailing that customers might never see. Most shops, for example, were generally fitted with a cashier's or accounts office – this might have been anything from an elaborate room with benches and stools, to a simple alcove. Here, stock records were maintained, dockets prepared, change dispensed and monthly accounts tallied. The office may also have had clerical furniture, accounting equipment and perhaps stored signs or other paraphernalia.

Country general stores usually had a produce store for bulk dry goods such as stock feed. The produce store may have been a shed or a lean-to attached to the shop. Sometimes it was a separate building altogether. Goods would have been moved into the store through a sliding door at the side or rear. Some stores used handcarts and others even employed a trolley system on tracks.

Shopkeepers and their families traditionally lived on or near the premises, enabling them to work long hours and provide some security for the shop. Most shops built in the nineteenth century, and well into the twentieth, had a residence attached at the rear or side of the building. Families from smaller shops might only have had a couple of rooms to share, whilst others lived in detached dwellings nearby.

Cafés required a kitchen or meals preparation area, and this might have been a special room at the rear or part of the residence. More specialised shops such as butchers, bakers, barbers and pharmacies required specialised work areas, ranging from bakehouses to dispensaries. These were all part of the shop but generally remained out of sight to the general public.

A surprising number of shops still retain these hidden workspaces. They add to the significance of a shop by helping us to understand much more about the daily business of retailing. The cashier's office, for example, is commonly found tucked away in a rear corner of older shops; produce stores and residences are sometimes intact, or have been kept but adapted for other uses.

Just as importantly, the movable objects associated with these work areas also contribute to the history of the shop: platform scales in the produce store, records in the office, stored furniture and outmoded equipment. These items can have particular significance while they remain associated with the store where they were used.



E. Bickmore, General Store, Kurri Kurri

In this complex, the shop, produce store and residence (with its large garden) were separate elements although they were built in the same period. The shop originally had a cellar for storing perishables, although this was subsequently filled in. *Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.*

Buying groceries

Grocers' shops, or grocery departments within larger general stores, were the precursors of today's supermarkets. For much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, people relied on grocers for staple foods such as sugar and tea. Shops and equipment from the heyday of the grocery trade still to be found in many places, and they are an important part of the story of retailing.

The name 'grocer' originally dates from the Middle Ages and described a wholesale trader of bulk foods such as spices. By the late-nineteenth century, grocers were tradesmen skilled in selecting and blending teas, roasting coffee beans and selling all manner of dry goods, although manufacturers had also begun to introduce pre-packaged products to promote their own brand names.

An instruction book for the Australian grocery trade, published in 1925, advised grocers how to lay out their stores and stock food. Walls were to be lined with square shelves of different sizes to accommodate the various packaged products. Bulk dry foods such as sugar and oatmeal should be stored in hopper bins beneath the counter; linoleum was best for floors, preferably laid over felt or newspaper, or dry sawdust to correct an uneven surface. The shop's cat received special mention for its role in deterring rodents.

Counters in older shops were generally of two sorts: French-polished mahogany for dry groceries and white pine that could be scrubbed daily for provisions such as cheese. By the 1940s grocers were complying with new hygiene standards and surfaces had to be easily scrubbed – linoleum, marble or tiles were recommended.

Self-service grocers' shops were also just beginning to emerge. In the 1950s many stores were converted to the new style of 'cash-and-carry'. Customers selected their goods from refrigerated display cases and racks of brand name foods and paid for them at the turnstile. Service took on a new meaning, as the traditional skills of the grocer gave way to managing a store that was well stocked and efficient.



Finn's Old Store, Canowindra

Kraft cheese boxes made ideal drawers in this former general store at Canowindra. The shop, now an antique business, still has hopper bins beneath the counter and drawers individually labelled with the names of spices and other cooking ingredients. *Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.*



The art of packaging

Every grocer's shop had an ample supply of brown paper and string for packaging goods. Before the advent of pre-packaged brand name goods, grocery items were supplied to shops in bulk and the grocer weighed or counted and packaged according to the customer's requirements. Some stores still use the once ubiquitous paper and string for certain goods. There are two paper dispensers, of different sizes, at Bickmore's General Store, and the Coolac General Store still employs string dispensers suspended from the ceiling. *Photographs by Joy McCann, 1999.*

The impact of government regulations

The business of preparing and selling fresh food has perhaps been subject to closer scrutiny and regulation than any other type of shop.

In early butchers' shops, for example, it was common to hang carcasses at the front of the shop to allow fresh air to circulate. With harsh climate and isolated settlements, necessity was the mother of invention for the Australian meat industry. Ice boxes, cool rooms and marble surfaces helped the situation, and many butchers' shops used these cooling techniques until well into the twentieth century. One of the earliest air refrigeration units in NSW was installed in Thomas Playfair's Sydney meat business in 1895.

By about 1900 attitudes to food hygiene had begun to change. Butchers, along with other food retailers, were under increasing pressure to conform to new hygiene regulations. The first meat inspector in the State was appointed in 1908, and by 1913 he reported that only five butchers' shops were left in Sydney that did not have enclosed premises. Soon, all butchers shops were required to be enclosed with mesh (glass came later), walls were to be tiled, and floors to be made of concrete. The use of sawdust to soak up spills and odours on the floor was deemed to be a thing of the past, although the practice continues in some butchers' shops.

In more recent years community concerns about contaminated meat has brought a fresh round of government regulation that will see the end of older equipment such as timber chopping blocks. By keeping these items in the shop, perhaps on display, owners can contribute to preserving and interpreting something of the heritage and character of food retail shops, as they respond to ever changing standards and technology.



James Leggatt's Smithfield Butchery, Gulgong

Carcasses hang from the verandah of a butcher's shop in Gulgong in the early 1870s. *Photograph courtesy of the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales.*

Short's Butchers, Narromine

Glenn Short's butcher's shop in Narromine was built in about 1905. When his father, Kevin, began working there in 1948, the shop still relied on its own abattoir for a regular supply of fresh meat.

A cool room at the rear of the shop was insulated by thick timber walls packed with charcoal. Pipes circulated through the room and were cooled to keep temperatures down. A second cool room, built inside the shop itself, had walls filled with sawdust for insulation, and had a water tray on top with strips of flannel over the side that dripped water.

The shop also once had hanging rails arranged in a semi-circle around the shop, and meat was prepared and displayed on slabs of white marble. Refrigeration and changing government regulations have brought many changes to butchers' shops such as this.

Above right, and right: Substantial butchers' shops were once common in suburbs and country towns, testifying as much to the important role that meat has played in the Australian diet as to changes in shopping habits. The unusual tiled façade and interior of this shop now regularly attracts visitors.

Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.



A Canadian maple cutting block is proudly displayed in Short's Butchers at Narromine.

Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.

Changing technology

The twentieth century revolution in technology has directly influenced many aspects of retailing, from handling money and recording sales, to preparing goods for sale and displaying merchandise. Many shopkeepers have embraced new technology with a passion. Others have never seen the need to do more than connect the electricity. Manual systems, early equipment and traditional tools of trade can still be found in daily use.

G.A. Zink & Sons, Oxford Street, Darlinghurst, Sydney

Zink's clothing shop for men was built in about 1911, but the display windows, terrazzo tiled porch and chromium-plated shop sign on the shop front are tell-tale signs of a refurbishment in the art moderne style in 1926.

The Zink family operated their business along the lines of a European tailor's shop. The present owner undertook his apprenticeship with the Zink family in the 1960s, and continued to work with them until acquiring the business himself. Whilst the layout has been altered over the years, the owner has cared for much of the shop's early equipment and furniture, and has reintroduced some elements that were kept safely stored until a recent refurbishment.

The shop and equipment together provide a tantalising reminder of the heritage of tailoring in Australia. In the tailor's room upstairs, worn wooden benches bear witness to many hundreds of hours of cutting and preparing garments.



G.A. Zink & Sons. Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.



In the tailor's workroom the sewing machines, overlockers, fans and radio are still going strong and are tangible reminders of the early technology of tailoring. Photographs by Joy McCann, 1999.

Tools of the trade

Tools of trade are a significant part of our shopping heritage, but they are often the very things that are sold off or lost when shops change hands or are modernised.

Display stands, weighing and packaging equipment, furniture, storage containers, advertising signs and flyers, specialised tools, shop records, cash registers or overhead cash transfer systems – all of these are significant because they illustrate how different types of shopkeepers went about selling their merchandise or service.

They also show how some types of shops had to be purpose-built for the trade, while others could easily move into any kind of shop building.

Barber shops, for example, had to have specially-designed chairs fixed to the floor, but their main tools of trade were very portable indeed: scissors, razors, a leather strap for sharpening blades and a sterilising cabinet. The shop itself was usually quite small, perhaps with two rooms and a solid panel behind the window display to block curious gazes and ensure privacy for the customer in the chair. How different from the open style of today's hairdressing shops.

A general store, on the other hand, needed plenty of shelving and counters and little specialised equipment. Many general stores were long and narrow, with high windows or skylights to maximise wall space and allow sufficient daylight to penetrate. The introduction of cash-and-carry shopping and refrigeration after World War II saw the introduction of additional display tables and stands, often acquired from other shops.

Meanwhile, drapers, mercers and milliners required specialised units and stands for displaying everything from garments to gloves. Whilst display cabinets are still relatively common in older clothing shops, the specialised wire stands and mannequins from earlier eras are now more likely to be found on display in museums.

All trades relied on advertising of some kind, from the cheapest window display to mail order catalogues and newspaper advertisements. However, it is the collectables, from shop signs to cash registers, that attract the most attention. Many original shop signs, cash registers and furniture, for example, have been snapped up by keen collectors. Collections of equipment and furniture that are still in place, and especially those items still in use, are particularly significant because they are now rarely found in situ.



Gestetner machine and stencils once used for preparing sale notices at the Model Store, Boorowa. *Photographs by Joy McCann, 1999.*



Distinctive store catalogues were a major form of advertising for department and chain stores from the late-nineteenth century, and mail order catalogues brought the city stores to country lounge rooms. Advertisements and mail order catalogues remain one of the most important sources of information about the range and style of equipment and merchandise to be found in shops in different eras and have themselves become part of the heritage of shopping. *The Draper of Australasia Diary, 1903, courtesy of Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW.*

Store records or archival material such as these stocktaking books from Bickmore's General Store dated 1907 and 1944 are irreplaceable, providing a glimpse of what people in rural NSW were buying during the war years. Paper records are particularly susceptible to being discarded or otherwise destroyed through neglect. Wherever possible, they should be kept with the shop and stored in a secure place free from insects and dampness. *Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.*



Cash or credit?

The way cash was handled and accounts processed often determined the layout of a shop. For example, most stores had a small office or alcove for maintaining accounts and keeping cash and records.

When people shopped in the early years of settlement in NSW, they generally expected to purchase on credit and settle their credit accounts at the month's end, or whenever they could afford it.

Gradually, cash trading became more popular amongst smaller shopkeepers, as a way of keeping the costs of buying and selling under control. Some small shops, particularly in the country, continued to extend credit to regular customers, while others advertised themselves as cash stores. According to the *Rydges Business Journal* in 1937, cash was much better suited to the city and suburbs, where people tended to be 'here today, gone tomorrow'.

With cash trading came a variety of methods to handle cash and dockets in shops. Some shopkeepers simply used leather bags or a cash drawer under the counter. Some still do! Others embraced the latest technology for cash handling. Aerial cash systems, also called 'flying foxes', were once common in stores across Australia. With a system of aerial wires to transfer cash and dockets between counter and cashier, assistants could devote themselves to serving customers and they no longer needed to waste precious selling time leaving the counter to visit the cashier's office. This system also gave the store owner the advantage of having greater control over the movement and security of cash transactions.

When cash registers were introduced in the 1920s, they became the ultimate symbol of the new era of cash-and-carry style of shopping that is still the way we shop today. Cash registers at the point of sale meant greater ease of handling and storing cash for the shop assistant, and went hand-in-hand with the self-selection of goods by the customer. The cash register was the product of a new style of technology.



Rose's General Store, Binalong

Many country stores today still retain their enclosed or partitioned office, which was usually located securely at the rear of the shop. The bigger department stores also established special rooms where large numbers of office assistants checked and sorted customers' dockets and, in some cases, dispensed change. *Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.*



G.J. Coles Department Store, Canberra, c.1958

Cash-and-carry made shopping easier and busier by speeding up sales, discouraging credit, and reducing the need for personalised service and shop assistants. *Photograph courtesy of the National Library of Australia.*



'Up-To-Date Store', Coolamon

When the Up-To-Date Store was built in 1909, it was fitted with the latest Lamson Ball System to transport notes and change from the shop assistants at the counters to the cashier's office at the rear. Cash handling systems have come full circle, and supermarkets in the late-twentieth century have returned to an old idea using new technology. These days, pneumatic tubes transfer cash from the point of sale, saving staff time and reducing the risk of carrying bullion bags to the cashier. *Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.*

The corner shop

The corner shop has a very special place in our history. Corner shops, strategically located within the heart of a community, have traditionally catered for the necessities of life – a loaf of bread, the newspaper, perhaps a few purchases – as well as being a place to gossip, exchange views or to pass the time of day.

For regular customers, a corner shop is much more than bricks and mortar. Over many years, these shops have dispensed a sense of stability and belonging in a world of rapid change. Studies have shown that they are particularly important for the isolated and frail in our society. The corner shop, the owner and customers themselves fulfil an important social function in the life of a community. The corner shop may be a private business, but it is a public place.

For many migrants running a corner shop has been an important part of putting down roots in Australia. Many corner shops, particularly after World War II, were run by migrant families. Family members all helped out, keeping the business open for long hours. In recent years, however, our insatiable demand for flexible shopping hours and the lure of supermarkets and 24-hour convenience stores has led to the demise of the humble corner shop.



Knuckey's Corner Store, Wellington

The shady verandah at Knuckey's Corner was always a popular spot for locals to meet and shelter and is part of the Swift Street heritage precinct. In the 1960s new council by-laws required the verandahs of Wellington to be removed because they posed a traffic hazard, and Grace Knuckey maintains that her business suffered as a result. The current verandah is a recent addition, designed to replicate the original from early photographs. In 2001 the corner store closed when Grace Knuckey retired and contents were sold. The corner store was under threat from a proposed car park but a community campaign, which saw thousands of signatures on petitions, saved it from demolition - for the time being.

Photograph by Joy McCann 1999.



Grace Knuckey (right), with her father and mother in the family store, Wellington, c.1960

Grace Knuckey worked at the counter of her corner store since she was 15 years old. Her father established Knuckey's Corner in 1915. For much of the century, the shop was open from eight in the morning until midnight every weekday.

Photograph courtesy of Grace Knuckey.

The Golden Gate Café, Hillston

The Kidman Way stretches for 800 km, south to north, connecting the remote towns of this State's outback country. When promoters produced a travellers' guide for the new highway, Bill Morgan's general store and café at Hillston was given special mention as a corner store, 'a favourite of both young and old'.

The Golden Gate Café was built in 1929 and Bill Morgan's parents bought it in about 1935. It was more of a café then. There were meals served at tables, and a marble soda fountain dispensing home-made fizzy drinks. Bill installed wooden cubicles for diners, and also sold lollies, ice-cream and fruit.

Bill once knew everyone that came in – people from town as well as the wheat and sheep farmers in the area. With improvements in road transport, the odd intrepid tourist or outback truckie would stop by. New agricultural and horticultural developments along the Lachlan River in the 1980s attracted new families and itinerant workers.

Then the new highway opened in the early 1990s. Bill's Golden Gate Café is poised to tap into a lucrative outback tourist market, one of an increasingly rare group of shops in the tradition of the old corner store.



Many aspects of this shop in Hillston were introduced by Bill Morgan in the 1940s, including new display cabinets and dining cubicles. The original ice-chilled soda fountain was replaced by refrigeration, but Bill still uses the soda taps. *Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.*



Lollies are still counted or weighed at the counter, and sold in a paper bag. *Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.*



A metal change tray still in daily use. *Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.*

Keeping traditions alive

People often take great pleasure and comfort from the well-worn floorboards, familiar faces and customs that they have come to associate with certain shops over many years. Corner shops often have the feel of an old friend. So do places like hairdressers or barbers' shops, the local butchers or greengrocers shop, or perhaps the general store. That air of familiarity, the habits of a lifetime and the traditional ways of doing things, are part of a community's less tangible heritage. The following examples show how a shop can play such an important part in keeping a community's traditions alive.



Harry's Café de Wheels, Sydney

Harry's mobile pie shop near the Woolloomooloo Wharf has become something of local legend, as well as popular tourist destination for visitors to Sydney. The original shop is in the collection of the Powerhouse Museum but the tradition of eating at Harry's continues. *Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.*

Leo Duff's Barber Shop, Wellington

When Leo Duff conducted a survey of 50 customers to see how they felt about the cobwebs in his shop, 35 voted that they should stay up there along the ceiling above the display window. After all, the cobwebs did not interfere with cutting hair. In fact, they were simply a part of the shop – spun with hundreds of stories and jokes shared by Leo's customers over many years.

In 1997, hundreds of Wellington residents, former staff and old and new customers turned out to help Leo Duff celebrate 50 years in business. The 50th anniversary book was signed by 712 people, a testimony to the role that Leo and his shop have played in the town. It was a day for speeches and entertainment, reviving old memories and renewing old acquaintances.

Leo opened for business on 25 August 1947 at the age of 19, fresh from a barber's apprenticeship in Penrith. On the first day of business, he arrived at the shop to find his first customers sitting on a step outside the shop. After opening the door, he found the electricity had not yet been connected, so the two boys were sent on to another barber. Fifty years later, those two 'boys' were amongst those who helped Leo to celebrate!

Leo still has all of his daybooks recording the shop income and expenses from that very first day. Even today, he marvels at his first week's takings – 10 pounds 1 shilling and 9 pence represented a fortune for a young lad in those first years after World War II. Leo's was one of seven barbers' shops in town. His own shop was one of a pair. The previous owner had operated a billiard room next door.

For many years Leo had three wooden barbers' chairs, two in the main shop and one in a back room. There was linoleum on the floor, and light bulbs hung from the high ceiling. Like most barbers of the period, Leo sold tobacco goods. His customers could also wager bets on the races, keep up with the boxing news, listen to the radio and smoke whilst they waited for their fortnightly trim and shave. Even though haircuts were a relatively cheap item in the household budget, Leo always had a large number of 'book ups' or credit customers in his record books. However, most paid up on payday or, in the case of boys, when father came in for his haircut.



Leo Duff in his shop in 1999. Some of Leo's customers were with him for more than 50 years, including one family that visited the shop for six generations. Leo's advice to barbers has always been: 'there's no fortune to be made, but there's a good living in it.'
Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.



Leo Duff (centre) in his shop in the 1950s, with Reg Laws (left, standing), Reynold Toyer (left, sitting), an unidentified assistant (right, standing) and Archibald Davis (right, sitting). Before the rise of unisex hair salons, barbers' and hairdressing shops tended to be exclusively men's or women's places. In Leo's shop, for example, men came for their fortnightly haircut and shave, and shared local news and jokes, and perhaps the odd wager on the horses. *Photograph courtesy of Leo Duff.*



Leo Duff's window display testifies to the gendered nature of barbers' shops and Leo's life-long association with the boxing ring, both as a young professional fighter, and later as a local boxing coach. A new window display always generated a lot of interest in the town. In 2001 Leo Duff's shop closed and Leo has moved to another barbers. *Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.*



Some of the significant items in Leo Duff's shop include the original cupboards, mirrors and a cash drawer, as well as scissors, shaving equipment, ashtray stand and a sterilizing cabinet. *Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.*



Oscar Michelini behind the counter at his family's Continental Deli in Harris Street, Fairfield, 1954. The customer is a friend, Mario Mariani. Greek, Italian and Lebanese shopkeepers were the face of Australia's emerging multiculturalism in the years of the postwar immigration program. The Sydney suburb of Leichhardt, for example, was known as 'Little Italy', and Italian shops sprang up to serve the needs of those newly arrived. *Photograph featured in exhibition titled 'Forza e Coraggio' Strength and Courage; The Italians of South Western Sydney, at Fairfield Regional Heritage Centre and Liverpool Bicentennial Museum, courtesy of the Michelini Family.*

The migrant experience

Many different cultures have influenced shopping heritage in Australia. Migrant shopkeeping families have enriched our history, as well as our shops and shopping streets. Many shops maintain and promote the traditions and foods of a particular culture. They have served many functions for people from migrant backgrounds – as a place to welcome new arrivals or meet old acquaintances, a place to buy traditional ingredients, play cards, get news or seek help or advice. The shops themselves have helped many newly arrived families to gain an economic foothold in their new country. Many shops have succeeded, often relying on the family unit to put in the long hours and hard work.

These shops have also been the setting for people encountering another culture for the first time, or at first hand. Many will recall their first experience of new food and new languages in a shop setting – perhaps an Italian greengrocer, a Vietnamese grocery store, a Lebanese clothing shop or a Greek café. In their own way, migrant shopkeepers have been the vanguard of our multicultural society.

In recent years, the shops established by migrant families have become the stalwarts of many shopping streets – staying put or setting up shop in the face of new shopping centre developments and economic downturn. In many places, migrant family shops have played an enduring and influential role in our retailing history and heritage.



Kwong Wa Chong, Haymarket, Sydney.

This shop was established in 1910 and is now the oldest shop in Chinatown. As a successful merchant, Kwong Wa Chong was a community leader and provided assistance to Chinese immigrants newly arrived in Australia. Chinese migrants have a long history of shopkeeping in Australia, from fruit and vegetable retailing before World War II to running cafés and restaurants. By the 1980s Chinese cafés were a familiar site in suburbs and country towns; there were 7,000 of them in NSW alone. *Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.*

The Niagara Café, Gundagai

Greek cafés and milk bars were once a familiar sight in suburbs and country towns throughout Australia. Greek cafés are still to be found, sometimes operated by the same family, and now often serving traditional Greek cuisine alongside the more familiar Aussie fare of steak, pies and hamburgers.

The Niagara Café is testimony to a shop that is still living and celebrating its migrant heritage. Built in 1902, it is a rare example of a Greek café that has changed little since its refurbishment by previous owners in 1933. It has also become something of a legend in the process.

Behind the curved display windows, over the terrazzo entrance and through the glass doors inscribed with the letters 'NC', visitors can still dine in timber cubicles, admire the wall mirrors and lights, and enjoy the traditional Greek hospitality of this country café.

In one display window of the Niagara Café, visitors can read about that famous visit of Australia's wartime Prime Minister, John Curtin. On a dark winter's evening in 1942, Curtin and his small party came to the café in search of a meal, and the china and silver tea service are now on show as a memorial to the part that the café played in our wartime history.



The Niagara Café has a striking art moderne style interior, with timber dining booths, black and chromium counters and a gleaming sign along the wall. The atmosphere and history have long made this café a favourite for travellers along the Hume Highway.

Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.



The Niagara's own piece of political history, on display in the front window to commemorate John Curtin's visit to the café in 1942.

Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.



Greek and Australian flags proudly displayed from one of the 1930s wall lights. *Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.*

A family store

The history of many a shop is inextricably linked with the history of a particular family. Family shops have often carried on through times of war and economic depression, loss of family members and the rise of the shopping centre, and a shop can sometimes tell as much about a family's history as it can about retailing history.

Bickmore's General Store, Kurri Kurri

When Edwin Bickmore built his first store along the main street at Kurri Kurri in the Hunter Valley in about 1904, he established a family business that would span the fluctuating fortunes of this small mining town during the course of the twentieth century.

Kurri Kurri was proclaimed a town in 1902 and serviced the crop of coal mining settlements at Stanford Merthyr, Pelaw Main and Abermain. A Scottish immigrant Edwin Bickmore arrived in the Hunter Valley to work in the new coalmines. By 1908 he was able to build his substantial new brick store and a separate residence opposite his first shop. He became a pillar of the local community and was a member of the Chamber of Commerce and involved in a wide range of local organisations.

This was a general store in the tradition of the universal providers that proliferated throughout NSW in the nineteenth century. Bickmore's sold boots and shoes, dress materials, manchester, clothing, ribbons, laces, hosiery, haberdashery items, as well as food, health remedies and hardware. Bulk dry foods were dispensed from the timber produce store at the rear and a cellar was used for storing bacons and hams.

Alec McIntosh married Mr Bickmore's daughter in 1934, and began working in the store with his new wife and father-in-law. Mr McIntosh had begun working in shops at the age of 14, and learnt his trade on the job and through classes on everything from ticket writing to selecting and using spices, cheeses and dried fruits.

Bickmore's was a meeting place as well as a shop, and the relationship between shopkeeper and customer was always friendly but respectful. Mr McIntosh recalls how he always took great care to scan the local newspaper for school examination results or other information, so that he could greet a regular customer with some favourable observation about their child or the family.

Eventually, Mr McIntosh took over the business, and his own family too became a part of the story of this shop. From about the 1960s the business began to feel the impact of widespread car ownership, as customers began to shop further afield. However, the shop operated as a corner store till the end of the century, though the range of its stock was much reduced since its heyday before World War II.



Alec McIntosh has watched generations of local children grow up. He recalls how he would keep an interest in their school or sporting achievements, and make a point of mentioning them when next their mothers came in to shop.
Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.



The haberdashery boxes are still in use.
Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.
