

# Brief History Of Nichols Service Station

*Prepared by Michelle Nichols from family records and with assistance from Ern and Geoff Nichols*

The Nichols family are proud of their association with Riverstone, having operated a service station in the town for 60 years. William Robert (Bill) Nichols who was born in 1903 in London and arrived in Sydney when he was nine years old originally established the business. The family settled in Richmond about 1917 and Ern, Bill's father, (a baker by trade), ran the Nichols Bakery and General Store in Windsor Street, Richmond. On completing his schooling, Bill was apprenticed to Wally Heap, a Motor Engineer in Windsor Street Richmond. He also drove hire cars for Wally Heap.

In the early 1920s Bill started his own Hire Car Service in Richmond. Around this time, Bill's girlfriend Florence Jennings and family moved from Richmond to Riverstone and established a poultry farm. Bill became interested in the potential of Riverstone and eventually moved there, leasing an old stable building opposite the present day Post Office in Garfield Road in 1926. This was the first motor repair shop opened in Riverstone. Petrol was dispensed from bowsters at the NSW Produce in the main street from kerbside manual pumps. Lane's Cycle shop (located where Fred and Wavy Coulter later had their store) also had a single bowser.

Bill's eight-seat Studebaker was often in demand. Taking persons from the train station to outlying areas such as Rouse Hill, Kellyville etc. He also transported carloads in excess of his eight seats to sporting events such as cricket, football, motor races, as well as to dances all over the district, including the Hawkesbury and Penrith areas.

In about 1927 Bill moved to a workshop partly occupied by Harry Williams the Blacksmith, on the corner of Garfield Road and Carlton Streets besides Riverstone Park, and worked long hours, sometimes seven days a week as work demanded. Two years later Bill married Florence Jennings at St. Andrews Church, Riverstone. They then moved into 20 Castlereagh Street with Bill's parents Ern and Annie, where they lived until 1939.

Sometime before 1935 Bill purchased land directly opposite what was the Olympia Picture Theatre in Garfield Road. (The site of the old theatre is now a Fruit Shop.) This site was situated in the centre of the Riverstone commercial district. The first purpose built garage building was completed and opened in 1935. The site, long since demolished is the present site of the Commonwealth Bank in Riverstone. This site had three hand operated petrol pumps of different brands on the kerbside.

During 1939 Bill had a new 'all electric' house constructed and the Nichols family moved into their new home in Pitt Street, adjacent to the old Methodist Church, shortly after World War II commenced. Things became difficult as the war developed and Bill joined the Volunteer Defence Corp in Riverstone. Early in 1942 he enlisted in the A.I.F. and was a mechanic/fitter in the Australian Armoured Division, serving his time in the northwest of Australia. Towards the end of the war in 1945, he applied for a discharge, as he was very concerned with his father's health. His father, affectionately known around the town as 'Pop' was at this time, 70 years of age and had looked after the business single-handed, whilst Bill was away. This was a mammoth task for a man of his age, he performed tyre repairs for cars and bikes, charged batteries and did general handyman work on broken equipment for people in the town. Pop's biggest worry was to equal out the petrol ration tickets coping with those who were in desperate need of petrol because of an emergency, and without the necessary coupons.

Following the end of World War II, Bill signed a deal with Mobil Oil. Bill's eldest son, Geoff (born 1930) started work at the garage and commenced his apprenticeship in 1946. As part of his training he attended Ultimo Tech. A mechanic's apprenticeship at this time was over a period of five years. Ern (born 1932) the second eldest son, named after his Grandfather, commenced in the workshop in 1947 with a pay of £1 per week. The following year he began his apprenticeship and attended Granville Tech. His apprentice pay increased to £1-7-6 per week.

According to an account book still held by the family, many local identities utilised the business. In 1949 Dr Carroll had his Ford greased for 7/6; Frank Norris needed a new expensive headlamp for £2; Mr N. Heather bought a quart of kerosene for 9/-; Clem Kelly (trucking contractor) purchased six gallons of petrol for 17/-. Other regular customers during 1949 included Mr Penman, A. James, Mr Shillington, Charlie Fisher, Mr Turnbull and Mr Simmons.

Bill planned to relocate his business and other venues were investigated. At one stage the Riverstone Terraces came under discussion but never got very far. With foresight he eventually purchased the block next to Tozer's old house, opposite Oxford Street and the Presbyterian Church (now Uniting Church). Bill was always game to have a go at something new and often undertook new ventures in the business. In the mid 1950s he obtained the Chrysler Peugeot agency and also sold second hand cars. At this stage rough sketches had been drawn up showing Bill's dream of a new garage. A memory of the 1950s was when the Riverstone Meatworks petrol tanks were waterlogged and the meatworks trucks had to purchase fuel at the Nichols Garage. The queue went back around Conway's corner, along Railway Parade.

Both Bill and Flo became very ill in the late 1950s with influenza and as a result Bill developed heart trouble and the relocation plan was set aside. Sadly Bill Nichols passed away in 1958, following a short illness, as a result of heart problems, aged only 54 years of age. He is remembered as a gentle and reliable man who built his business on integrity. As a result of Bill's death, Ern aged 26 years, took over the running of the business. Geoff at this time was working in Parramatta. Flo Nichols, Bill's widow was enticed to become involved in the business where she looked after the accounts and helped out with selling petrol on the driveway. A noteworthy incident took place in the late 1950s. Mobil ran the **Bobby Limb's Mobilgas Millionaire Competition**. Flo encouraged George Bond, a TV repairer of Vineyard, to enter the competition on a Friday afternoon and the following week he was announced the winner. It was worth over £4,500 and included a trip to England and Europe, a Simca car, a boat with a trailer and spending money. Ern was involved with the official prize ceremony, which attracted considerable publicity, and the family business was proud to be associated with the win.

The business grew and prospered and in the early 1960s it was decided to follow Bill's plan to relocate. The new Nichols Service Station began construction on the site in Garfield Road. It was designed in consultation with Mobil and was built by W. McNamara Pty Ltd. (The head of this well-known construction company was Bill McNamara, who was married to Flo's niece, Patty.) From the 1960s petrol for the business was purchased from Mervyn Bassingthwaite, commonly known as 'Bass' of Pitt Town. After many teething problems the business opened in 1962. It boasted a modern driveway, lubitorium and pit with two extra workshop bays. To keep things going and build up the business many late nights were experienced finishing motor repairs.

Although Pop no longer worked at the Garage, he remained a popular figure at the business, where he visited daily. His visits always coinciding nicely with 'cup of tea time'. He was often seen tottering down Oxford Street towards the Service Station at a great speed, almost unable to stop at the busy intersection of Garfield Road. In 1962 Geoff returned to the business and modern wheel aligning and balancing equipment was installed. The old Tozer house, adjacent to the garage was purchased and demolished in readiness for a new upgrade. Around this time the business became a Proprietary Company. 'Pop' Ernest Nichols passed away in 1967. Patriarch of the small Nichols clan, he was 92 years old at the time of his death.

During the early 1970s extensions for the next stage of the complex were underway. The petrol at this time was purchased through Mobil Oil Australia from the Rose Hill refineries. One of the major considerations of the new construction was that it was to be built off the road, as there were plans for widening Garfield Road. Thirty odd years later and this still has not taken place. During this period, the children of both Geoff and Ern, fourth generation members of the Nichols family were working at the service station, both full time and part time. Customers were also collecting *Tiki Green stamps* from purchases at the Garage which could then be exchanged for prizes.

In 1974 the new Service Station and extensions were opened with much fanfare in the town. A searchlight lit up the skies and there were giveaways and prizes. The old garage was converted into workshop areas plus the two extra bays (hoist and pit) providing eight bays of a modern service centre. There were three working pits, a hoist and four other bays. The huge driveway canopy and shop front with a store room was quite progressive in the town and the industry as a whole. Larger capacity fuel tanks were also added to the new site and two islands of pumps were now available. During the next ten years there were 12 to 16 staff members employed plus casuals. Nichols Auto Centre as it was known in the 1970s celebrated 50 years in business in 1976. There were free gifts with every \$3 purchase of petrol (yes \$3) plus a guessing competition with valuable prizes such as a 'portable transistor cassette player'. The people in Riverstone will remember the frustrating petrol strikes of the 1970s and 1980s when the queues of cars wound down Garfield Road, into Pitt and then Market Street.

Nichols Service Station was awarded the contract for the NRMA depot in Riverstone in 1979. This included 24-hour road service for the Riverstone district, membership and insurance. In 1980 the first payment was taken by Wendi Nichols, Ern's daughter and made by Geoff Follett. The NRMA was a bolster at the time when business was a struggle. Then in 1985 a decision to sell the business came about. Ern and Geoff had decided they had reached the time where they either sold out or invest for a big change to go to Mobil Mart style marketing that required a big financial investment. This was the period when service stations became self-serve and commenced selling a wide range of items.

None of the family seemed to have a lot of enthusiasm for this plan and although the decision to sell was not difficult, it was an emotional strain for the three partners Flo, Ern and Geoff who were giving up a whole way of life. The business was sold to Dan Jaworski in 1986. He renamed the business Dan's Motors. After a short illness, Flo Nichols passed away in 1988. The Nichols Service Station retained a good reputation throughout the years in Riverstone. It was established at a time when Riverstone was still a small country town but grew as Riverstone developed. Ern remembers the way the people of Riverstone rose to the occasion in times of crisis such as war, floods, bushfires and personal tragedies, an attitude that set Riverstone people apart.

A number of family members were employed at various times in the business including Ern and Geoff's brother Warren (a qualified tradesman) who worked on the driveway casually, and their younger sister Janice Ham. Ern's daughter Wendi was employed for many years on the driveway and then in the NRMA department. Geoff's wife Gwen and son Graham worked for a number of years. Ern's wife Joyce worked for a brief period and daughters Karen, Michelle and Tracey worked casually on the driveway for many years. Geoff's daughter Julie and Ern's daughter Jennifer worked for a short stage after they finished school. A number of local people were employed over

the years. Some of the employees included: Archie Davis, Stan Hibbert, Gough Wilson, Ken Knobbs (and his brothers Peter and Ian) Alan Gould, Ted Thomas, John Thomas, Bill Wilson, 'Archie' Arthur Davies, Matthew Mockovic, Jim Flowers, Bill Burnett, Alan Brookes, Graham Kelly, Garry Wilson, Ron Collier, Ted Vredegoor, Neville Bennett, Vic Hockley and Robert Calvert. Part time and casual staff included Beverley Crouch, Robert Wallace, Geoff Follett, Pat Shields, Chris Soley, Ronnie Parker, Chris Thomas, Mark Keegan and Howard Lee.

Both Ern and Geoff vividly recall some of the early customers in the business. They remember some of the real 'characters' and pioneers of Riverstone, as well as the business people who worked so hard to make a living. Another recollection is of the various European migrants who farmed in and around Riverstone, Marsden Park and Schofields. They were hard working and brought many different ideas as well as much character to the town.

Some of the business customers included NSW Produce and Bert Lillia/Manager; Carlisles Shop and Roy Cooke/Store Manager; Riverstone Meatworks including managers Bloxsom and Gleeson; Lyle Rosenthal and Les Schilling of Rosenthal's Store; Taylor's Produce and Claude Schofields. Other early customers were Gerald and Rod Terry as well as the Hamilton's from Rouse Hill House. Local doctors such as Rich, Carroll, Boag, Lapin, Wilkie, Gazzard, Dixon and Penhall plus Sister Barnes were regulars. Other customers in alphabetical order included: Jack Arnold (shopkeeper), Bill and Edna Blair (shopkeepers), Eric Brookes (bootmaker and shoe shop), Fred and Wavy Coulter, Bill Dawson, Charlie Fisher (baker), Tommy Freeman (shopkeeper), Rev Hawkins (Anglican Church), Jack Knudsen, Bill, Brian and Tom McNamara, Jimmy Martin (dairy and milkman), Connie Moulds and son Lawry (trotting breeders and drivers), Rosa brothers, Laurie Rothwell, Bill Saundercock and sons Alf and Henry, Arthur Smith and daughter Erna, Dick Stacey and children Dick, Jean, Joy and John (greengrocers), Ray Tozer and family, Visocchi's of Cow Flats (home made ice cream), Aunt Mary Wallace, Wally Woods (businessman and trotting driver).

Those were the days.....