

Conway's

Compiled by Clarrie Neal from information provided by Eric Conway, Michael Groves, Geoff Pfister and Rosemary Phillis.

The Conway's story in Riverstone begins with Norman Joseph Conway, a son of John Conway who had migrated from Ireland late last century and who went out west to work at Orange. Later he moved to Riverstone to work as a butcher at the meatworks owned by Benjamin Richards.

Norman was born in 1893 and as a youth learnt the trade of hairdressing. In 1914 he married Lily Pearson, a girl from Parramatta, at St. Mark's Church, Granville. As a newly married couple they moved into their home with a barber shop on the side in Garfield Road Riverstone, on the site of the present day Liquor Barn. It was in this house they commenced raising their family of six children - Mavis b.1915, Neville b.1917 (died when just 3 years old), Eric b.1918, Laurel (Peggy) b.1920, Cliff b.1923 and Patricia b.1927.

The hairdressing business prospered and in 1925 Norman was able to purchase a block of land opposite the railway station. On the 6th February 1925 the *Windsor & Richmond Gazette* reported: *Mr Norman Conway has purchased one of the most valuable business sites of the town. The land is situated on the James estate opposite the local railway station, where it is intended to erect a commodious hairdressing salon at an early date. Since it has been a vital question with the ladies 'shall we have it bobbed or shingled', Mr. Conway has become famous as a tonsorial artist, hence the necessity of larger premises.*

Work commenced on the two storey building almost immediately and it was completed late 1925. At the time the building was the only one on the block and comprised a newsagency and barbers shop with a family residence on the upper floor. The residence had two bedrooms with built-in wardrobes and along the hall there were two skylights, features that were rare in those days but were to become popular some 40 years later. The barbers shop was fitted out with three chairs and the two barbers who worked with Norman were Harry Mangold and Ossie Robbins.

Ossie loved to tell Eric the story of the day not long after the shop opened, that Edwin S. Rouse of Rouse Hill house drove up to the shop in his horse and sulky, and while remaining seated in the sulky, called out in a typical gentry manner *Conway..... Conway*. Norman, in a typically Australian manner, casually strolled out to the doorway and responded with *what do ya want.....Rouse*.

Eric, after completing his primary schooling at Riverstone Public School attended Westmead Technical College in 1931 and 1932 and then left to help his mother with the shop. Eric said he could never remember getting the cane at school but a check of the school records show that both he and Cliff were not that well behaved, both receiving the cane for such misdemeanours as 'swearing' and 'persistent disobedience after being kept in'.

Eric recalls as a lad walking out to Eastern Creek with his father and the family's pet dog 'Bulla'. Arriving at the creek Norman would produce a cake of soap from his pocket, soap up Bulla and then throw him in the creek for a wash. (Riverstone did not have a water supply in those days.)

At that time papers were sold in two other shops in Riverstone but Norman was able to buy out their franchises and so became the only newsagent in town. Norman had more than a passing interest in the racing industry owning a mare called *Patwood* that was to win several races at the pony tracks at Rosebery and Victoria Park. I wonder how many older residents of Riverstone can recall the photos of *Patwood* that adorned the walls of the shop.

In those days there were no TABs and though S.P. betting was illegal it was a flourishing business, particularly in barber shops. The shop in Riverstone was no different and it was always possible to get a bet on at the back of the shop - the Gazette reporting on the 7th March 1932 that *a Mr. Norman Conway was charged with illegal betting.*

Norman Conway died in 1936 at just 42 years of age and was buried in the Riverstone cemetery in the same grave as his three year old son Neville.

Lily Conway was to lead a very busy life managing the shop that operated seven days a week and caring and providing for her five children. The shop was to become very much a family business with Eric and his mother working all their lives in the shop and Cliff, after working several years at Mick Simmons in the Sydney Haymarket area returning to work at the shop along with his wife Norma. Mavis was to spend much of her life with the shop, as did her son Michael Groves. The shop was rarely referred to as a papershop or newsagency, the residents of Riverstone always referring to it as Conways or more popularly as 'Connies'.

During the 1930s the papers were brought from Sydney to Riverstone by train, arriving at 6.45am. Eric would carry the bundles across to the shop and then fold them ready for delivery around the town. There was no tape, elastic bands or plastic in those days to roll the papers, so they had to be folded to be delivered. Eric's first delivery vehicle was a bicycle fitted with a large metal box over the front wheel to carry the papers.

During the 1940s the papers were delivered from a horse and sulky that was leased from Charley Fisher who owned the town bakery. Every morning Eric would harness up the horse and sulky and set out on his run around the town, he recalls it was a great job when the weather was fine. But he also remembers returning back to the shop many a day freezing cold or soaking wet, and sometimes both. Over this period there were three horses that were used in the sulky to deliver the papers - the creamy pony was known as *Trixie*, the bay horse was known as *Johnny*, and the grey pony was known as *Hiraji*, named after the horse that won the Melbourne Cup in the late 1940s.

When Eric and Cliff received their call up into the army in 1941, the delivery of the papers with the horse and sulky was taken over by their sister Mavis. She delivered the papers this way seven days

a week for the four and 1/2 years they were away in the army. Of a cold frosty morning Charley Fisher would take two hot house bricks from the bakery ovens, wrap them in a hessian bag and place them on the floor of the sulky to be used by Mavis as a foot warmer.

Many older Riverstone residents would agree this was a very welcome innovation as they recall those bitterly cold frosty mornings. Eric recalls Mavis telling him that the day the war ended, as she did the rounds women were coming out of their homes to place flags and streamers on the horse and sulky. It was their way of celebrating peace.

In the 1940s and 1950s there were two morning papers – the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Daily Telegraph*. In the afternoon there were another two papers – the *Daily Mirror* and *The Sun*, each paper costing two pence. On Sundays there were three papers – the *Sunday Herald*, *Sunday Telegraph* and the *Truth*. Eric recalls that some Sundays up to 1,000 papers would have to be folded and delivered, as many families bought both major Sunday papers and sometimes all three.

The shop was the lottery agency and at the time there was only one lottery with a first prize of 5,000 pounds and tickets costing five shillings each. In those days the first five major prize winners had their name and address printed in the paper, so there was always some excitement in the town when a resident from Riverstone won a major prize.

The shop was also the tobacconist. Most smokers, and there were many, would buy their tobacco and papers and roll their own cigarettes. Because of the war it was almost impossible to buy good tobacco and what was available was of inferior quality. As the good tobacco became available it was rationed out, one packet to each customer, then as supplies improved it became two packets plus a packet of cigarettes.

The popular tobacco brands were *Capstan*, *Log Cabin*, *State Express*, *Havelock* and *Champion Ruby*, and the popular cigarettes were *Capstan*, *Craven A*, *333s*, *Ardath* and *Players*.

The passageway at the side of the shop was used as a bicycle rack. Cyclists, mostly schoolchildren who used the train to get to school, could ride their bikes to the station, leave them in the passage and know their bike would be still there to ride home. Some days there would be 30 bikes parked in this passage.

During the 1950s when the trotting industry was in its hey-day, many good trotters were owned and trained in Riverstone. During this period Eric had an interest in a trotter named *Regal Prince*, a very good horse trained and driven by Wally Wood that went on to win five races at Harold Park.

Mavis's eldest son Michael Groves worked in the shop from 1962 to 1984 and shared the morning deliveries with Eric, now done with a Land Rover. Michael recalls living at the shop with his parents Mavis and Harry Groves until they could build their own home in Regent Street. As a child Michael loved to accompany Eric in the horse and sulky with his morning deliveries, and also serve in the shop when allowed.

He commenced full time work in the shop in 1962 and remained there till it was sold in 1984. He recalls it being a 4.00am rise to get ready to sort and roll the papers that now arrived by road from Sydney at 5.00am The shop was opened shortly after to sell the papers to the travellers on the 5.20am train to Sydney and the early starters at the meatworks. Evening papers still arrived by rail and the shop remained open Mondays to Fridays till 6.40pm or till just after the last workers train arrived in from Sydney.

Saturdays the shop would close at 1.00pm and then re-open at 5.00pm to sell the evening papers. As a child Michael remembers the 'six o' clock swill' when the hotel had to close at 6.00pm. He recalls patrons coming around the corner and over to the shop to get their evening papers, some walking briskly and others not so steady on their feet.

Throughout the 1940s and 50s Ossie Robbins was the only barber to work in the salon, right up till his death in 1957. He was a very popular and jovial fellow who loved to stir up debates with his customers, one could say with the scissors or the razor in his hands he had a captive audience.

Ossie was also very popular with us kids because when children's haircuts cost sixpence he would always give us a penny change to buy a penny ice-cream or a bag of lollies. To get this penny he would continually remind us that we had to behave while waiting our turn to get the haircut.

From 1957 to 1964 Brian McNamara was the barber, until the barber shop area was required to expand the newsagency to a much larger shop. Brian moved his hairdressing business just around the corner into Garfield Road and at that time employed an apprentice named Geoff Pfister.

When the newsagency was expanded it was still very much a family business with Mrs Conway, Eric, Cliff and Michael working full time. Mrs Lily Conway passed away in 1973 and was buried in the Pinegrove cemetery at Rooty Hill. Eric, Cliff, his wife Norma and Michael carried on until 1984, when the shop was finally sold and so ended a family business that had served Riverstone for just on 60 years, truly the end of an era in the history of Riverstone.

Eric stated at the time: *I've enjoyed every minute of my work, and I wouldn't change my life with anybody's. I've been very happy doing what I've done.*

Eric, Cliff and Norma retired at this time and all three are now enjoying their retirement living at Manly, though Cliff and Norma did remain in Riverstone for a few years before moving. I am sure that everybody in Riverstone wishes them all many more years of happy retirement.

The shop finally ceased to operate as a newsagency in 1996 when the new owners decided to move the business into nearby Marketown. It remained vacant for a few months before being bought by Geoff Pfister who restored the premises to their original condition and re-opened it as *Geoffreys Hair Flair* on the 10th March 1997. The walls are adorned with old photos of Lily Conway, Norman, Eric as a boy, Ossie Robbins and several others.