

Mulford's Tuck Shop

Betty Coleman and Fay King (nee Mulford)

Mr and Mrs L.H. Mulford moved to Riverstone in late 1939 with their four small children, Betty six years, Faye five, Leslie three and the new baby Roy who had been born in November of 1939.

Leslie Henry Mulford married Ruth Doreen Jurotte in 1932. For the first seven years of their married life they lived and worked in the Sydney area. Mr Mulford was a machine operator at the Sydney Woollen Mills, making blankets for our servicemen in the Second World War. Mrs Mulford was, before her marriage, a seamstress in a shirt-making factory.

Mrs Mulford's aunty, Mrs Stella Hughes, whose husband Bill was, for many years, the local bootmaker in Garfield Road, encouraged the young Mulfords to open a shop in the town. They came directly from Dulwich Hill to Riverstone where they lived in a tin shed at the bottom of their property. This shed consisted of a dirt floor with hessian bags covering the window openings and the only door. These were difficult times for the young Mulford family, no running water, no electricity, scorching hot summers and freezing cold winters. The block of land, which the Mulfords bought for five pounds from Blacktown Council, was in Garfield Road East near the Riverstone Primary School and opposite the Masonic Hall, which today is the Blacktown City Bicentennial Museum.

Les worked night shifts at the Woollen Mills so he could spend his days preparing the land for the building of his shop. He continued to do this until they had saved enough money to hire two local tradesmen, Mr Walker from Quakers Hill and 'Bull' Greentree from Riverstone. Jack Jurotte, Ruth's younger brother, and Les himself worked as the builders' labourers. As this was the beginning of the war years, building materials were in short supply and the days of rationing had begun. Later, when the Tuck Shop was open, ration books for many necessary items was the only way customers were able to buy the things they needed.

The Tuck Shop was built, bit by bit, as money became available. The shop front was full brick, with a large display front window purchased with five pounds borrowed from Mr Mulford's elderly parents. The back of the shop was a fibro living area consisting of two bedrooms, a bathroom and a kitchen. As more money became available a third bedroom, a dining room and a lounge room were added.

Ruth Mulford also worked very hard, caring for her four small children while cooking meat pies, sausage rolls, potato scallops, making hot dogs, apples on sticks, frozen oranges and her own milk ice blocks. Perhaps today, in the year 2001, some may still remember her toffees with a lucky halfpenny in the bottom of some of them. These were very popular as the children loved looking for the halfpenny.

As there was no delivery of goods in those days, Les had to go every Thursday to the Homebush meatworks to buy smallgoods for the following week. This he carried on his shoulders, from the meatworks to Flemington railway station and up hill from Riverstone station to his shop.

The first commercial ice cream came from Lynam's factory in Parramatta, arriving by train in steel containers packed in padded containers called 'shippers', a little like our esky bags of today, only much larger. These shippers were packed with dry ice to prevent the ice cream from melting. These containers were then picked up at the station by Les and taken to the shop as soon as possible to be placed under refrigeration. During this period Les was still working night shift at the Woollen Mills at Parramatta and Ruth was running the shop by herself during the day while Les caught up on some much needed sleep.

One day, whilst Ruth was alone in the shop, a group of Gypsies entered, asking her to cross their palms with silver and they would tell her fortune. This frightened the young Mrs Mulford and she tried to give her daughter Betty the eye and nod to go and wake Les. But Betty was only eight and failed to see the danger in the situation. Thus the Gypsies were able to take advantage of Ruth being alone and robbed the old-fashioned wooden drawer till. Boy, was the young Betty in trouble!

There were times too, during this period, when the Mulford children felt the wrath of their parents for handing out free lollies and chocolates to their many 'friends' through the bathroom window!

Some time later, Noons Soft Drink Factory, from South Windsor, started delivering drinks to the Riverstone shops. Their Ginger Beer and Creaming Soda came in stoneware flagons and were the best flavoured soft drinks ever! Whenever the family went on a picnic to the river at Windsor they would bury the flagons in the sand near the water's edge to keep them cool. It was some years later that Les worked to have both Shelleys drinks and Westons biscuits start deliveries to Riverstone.

By this time Les had acquired enough finances to buy himself a second-hand Bedford truck which was affectionately known in the family as 'Pancho'. This allowed him to give up his job at the Woollen Mills and to start home deliveries in the Riverstone and surrounding areas. During the winter months he would deliver wood, coal and coke, while in the summer he would deliver soft drinks. This was tiresome work as Les had to travel to Mortlake in Sydney to pick up the coal and coke. At times during these journeys old Pancho would 'spit the dummy' and refuse to work, or would throw a flat tyre, always, it seemed, with a full load of coal or coke on board.

Another trip for Pancho was to Arnotts Biscuit Factory in Homebush where Les would purchase his regular supply of biscuits for his shop trade. These biscuits came in tins of five or six pounds weight (about two and a half kilograms) of loose biscuits. When sold these were put into paper bags and weighed to the customer's requirements. The tins later became famous for the Arnotts wrapping around the outside of the tin which had a picture of a Rosella on a perch standing on one leg while munching on the also famous Sao held in its other claw.

Other items bought in bulk, bagged and sold by weight were sugar, flour, tea, salt, potatoes and onions. Milk was bulk delivered in steel containers from Jimmy Martin's dairy in McCulloch Street and was sold over the counter by scoop measure, poured into the customer's own billy cans.

Around this period a double brick garage was added to the property, not just to house the car, but as a storeroom for soft drinks and other non-perishables, a much grander house than the fibro house in which the family lived.

Les Mulford also started a bottle collection business in partnership with his two brothers. This business operated from the back of the Tuck Shop and was very successful for a few years, until the partnership fell through.

Each Christmas the Tuck Shop was closed and the family, together with some friends, would climb on the back of old Pancho and head for Coogee Beach (no seat belts in those days). There were no eskies so we used to pack the food in tubs with ice. There were fresh garden salads, home cooked chicken (freshly killed by Les himself). There was watermelon, lollies, soft drinks and homemade fairy cakes. At that time chicken was a Christmas treat only, not available throughout the year. They were wonderful fun-filled Christmases for the Mulford family. Sometimes the Tuck Shop was closed for two weeks over the Christmas school holidays, when the family would migrate to Tuggerawong Lakes, where Les had three married brothers and their families living by the lakefront...Wonderful summer days were spent beside the then pristine lake.

1948 and the Mulfords decided to lease their Tuck Shop and move on. For a short time they both worked at the Riverstone Meatworks until they were able to buy a small fibro Kiosk opposite Riverstone railway station. With this Kiosk they started from scratch again. Here they created a small Tea Room selling hamburgers, tea, sandwiches, cakes, pies, milkshakes, soft drinks etc.

The success of the Tea Room encouraged Les and Ruth to build a large Café/Milk Bar, so they purchased two blocks of land next to what was then Conway's Newsagency and Ossie Robbins' Barber Shop combined (now Geoff Pfister's Barber Shop). The remaining block of land next to the new Café was later sold to Frank Culina, who built what was originally a fruit shop and now, in 2001, is a Take-Away Food Shop.

The new Café/Milk Bar, called the 'Aussie Café', was completed in 1952. In the following five years, with the help of their adult children, the Mulfords created yet another successful business. In 1957, with most of the children married and moved away, the café was sold, and Les and Ruth moved to Parramatta, where they stayed until 1969.

The School Tuck Shop was first leased, in 1948, to a lovely family called McDonald. They had a daughter, Rosemary, and a younger son, Terry, who was tragically killed whilst riding his push bike on the Windsor Road. The family left the Tuck Shop a few years later and it was then leased to the Agten family. Les and Ruth later returned to run their Tuck Shop, with the assistance of their daughter, Betty Coleman, husband Vic. and children Peter and Debbie. Once again they turned the Tuck Shop into a thriving business, employing four casual staff.

In 1971, at only 56 years, Ruth Mulford was killed in a car accident when a young unlicensed driver made a fatal right hand turn in front of the car in which she was a passenger. Ruth had a very generous heart and would always help anyone in need. This was evidenced at her extremely large funeral where the cortege stretched from St. John's Catholic Church in Garfield Road to the Castlebrook Cemetery at Windsor Road, Rouse Hill.

After the death of his wife, Les sold the Tuck Shop and premises to his daughter Betty and her husband Vic Coleman. The Coleman family extended one side of the shop to include a Barbecue Chicken area, and added costume jewellery, toys and some Filipino clothing and artefacts. They then turned the front room of the living area into a Pinball Room, where the young people of the district could enjoy many happy times under the direct supervision of the Coleman family. Any swearing cost the young offender twenty cents, which went into the Salvation Army box. Any other offence would incur a two weeks' suspension from the Pinball Room.

The Colemans had a casual staff of six ladies, Joyce Erskine, Margaret Mills, Joan Freeman, Nancy Mulford (Les Junior's wife), Maureen McGaughey and Gladys Coleman (Vic's mother). From 1939 until 1982 the Tuck Shop business had expanded to include the sale of fireworks (when they were legal), livestock, personal items of real estate and motor vehicles.

Late in 1982 the shop front was leased to St Vincent de Paul and in 1984 the entire premises passed out of the hands of the Mulford/Coleman families for the first time in forty-five years.

In 1985 Carlo Aloï sadly demolished the original shop and premises and built the structure that stands today, which is now called 'Carlos'.

From 1971, until his death on the 15th March 1998, Les Mulford lived in retirement in Gladstone Parade, Riverstone.