

The Dying Butcher's Farewell

By E.W. Forbes For Herman Wittig

This poem appeared in the *W. & R. Gazette* on the 18th December 1897, along with this footnote:-

Herman Wittig's address is Riverstone – the best shop outside Sydney for a shave, shampoo, or a haircut. Pipes repaired and cleaned, and good cigars and tobacco.

A butcher from our meatworks, lay dying in his bed
His comrades standing by could see, his life had almost fled.
They listened with an anxious ear, to what he might say
They knew full well he could not live, till dawned another day.

“Oh, comrades” said the dying man, “one last fond wish I crave,
Do take me to Wittig’s shop, to get a decent shave.
In days gone by he cut my hair, made me look spruce and clean
And many a time in Wittig’s shop, some splendid work I’ve seen.

“My uncle from strange foreign lands,
Had youth and beauty in his looks, when shaved by Wittig’s hands,
And Mother, ‘ah friends’, she was the kindest of mammas
Would often say she loved the smell, of Wittig’s best cigars.

“She always gave us good advice, as only mothers can
And she told us when we learnt to smoke, that Wittig was the man
Who sold the best tobacco, and did a roaring trade
And put all the other shops in town, completely in the shade.

“Tell her I did my work real well, and if her poor heart frets
Tell her I smoked my farewell smoke, in Wittig’s cigarettes.
She knows that I obeyed her, then ‘twill her poor heart cheer,
But give my love to Wittig, lads, I cannot linger here.”

“I’m dying, yes, I’m dying,” gasped the gallant butcher, when
He gently sighed and breathed his last, amidst the bravest men.
And when he reached the golden gate, St. Peter shook his hand
And told him amongst the angels, to take a glorious stand.
Good old St. Patrick welcomed him, and hoped he’d always stop,
For well he knew that he had brought, some weed from Wittig’s shop.

The following is an excerpt from the booklet “The Hairdressers” by Clarrie Neal.

The Barber’s shop in many country towns was not just a place where you got a haircut and a shave, for the locals it was a meeting place, a place to talk and where you learnt what was happening in the town. This was certainly the case with Riverstone. With no electricity, hair was cut with scissors and hand held clippers, and shaving was done with a cut-throat razor.

In 1894 Mr Herman Wittig, Hairdresser and Tobacconist, operated the ‘London Shaving Saloon & Store’ at 16 Garfield Road. This was the same building used as a shoe shop by Eric and Fay Brookes from the 1960s.

The poem above, written by a butcher from the Meatworks, gives an indication of the respect Herman Wittig received from the community. However, this respect could not endure through the years of the First World War, and Mr Wittig, a barber in the town for more than 20 years, saw many of his customers desert his business. He was virtually forced to leave Riverstone because of his German ancestry.