

The Wattle Milk Bar

Rosemary Phillis

I have fond memories of the Wattle Milk Bar in the 1960s and 70s. The Wattle was a place of treats like milk shakes served in metal containers drunk through a paper straw. (With that special satisfaction of ‘slurping’ the last of the contents hoping that your mother didn’t hear you.)

Who can forget ‘Big Charlie’ bubblegum with thirty centimetres (or a foot back then) of bubblegum that made your jaws tired to chew? Choo Choo bars, little lolly cigarettes in a cardboard packet, Redskins and Milkos. Football cards, with a thin stick of bubblegum and the aim to collect the whole series then turn the cards over and put together a complete picture of the previous grand final. (Did anybody ever achieve this?)

Merchandising extended from football cards through to Coca Cola and Fanta yo yos and later “Ding Bats”. All purchased from the Wattle with carefully saved money.

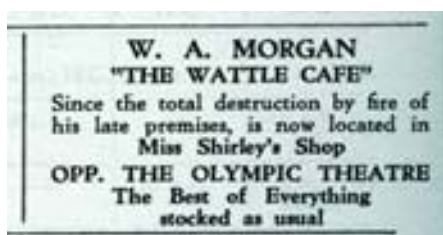
My mother recalls her father and uncle buying lollies for the family on a Friday night on their way home from work in the 1930s. For over fifty years residents of Riverstone shopped at the Wattle Milk Bar, but the retail history of the site extends back even further.

According to Clarrie Neal, the Wattle site is thought to have been the location of the first store in Riverstone, when J. J. Lephherd set up a store in a tent in the 1880s. Next Alfred Bambridge and Mr Taylor built a two storey general store on the site. They were later brought out by Llewellyn John Darling who enlarged the store in 1893.

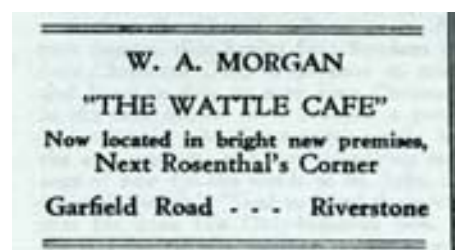
Mr Darling sold the lease to M. M. Cohen who in 1923 sold to Lyle Rosenthal and Stewart Filmer, the store known as ‘Lyle Stewarts’. When Mr Rosenthal bought out the Filmers the store became known as ‘Lyle Rosenthalls’. They sold groceries, papers, mercery, drapery, medicines, shoes etc. In 1929 Rosenthalls moved to new premises on the corner and the old double storey shop was taken over as a milk bar by Mr and Mrs Morgan, with the Gough family occupying an adjacent store.

In 1932 the shops were destroyed by fire. The ferocity of the fire was described in a report in the *Windsor and Richmond Gazette* of 9 September 1932:*The outbreak was the most spectacular seen at Riverstone for many, many years, and completely reduced the two buildings to ruins. Scores of people turned out to the fire, the majority clad in their night attire. The heat from the burning building was so terrific that people were unable to pass along the footpath on the opposite side of the road without being severely scorched....*

Until a new building was constructed by local builder Ray Vaughan, the Wattle operated in temporary premises as the following ads in the Church of England paper *The Church News* show.



Ad from December 1932 to April 1933.



Ad from May 1933 onwards.

The next operator of the Wattle was Mrs Roberts. Clarrie Neal records that the Wattle was... *Occupied by Mrs Roberts until 1942, when it was taken over by Horrie Kelly and his wife Pat. Horrie was a building contractor from Punchbowl engaged to build the new incinerator for the Meatworks in the paddock opposite Hobart Street. Horrie used to go to this milk bar for his lunch every day, with the conversation between him and Mrs Roberts leading to an unusual swap. The house at Punchbowl was swapped for the Wattle Milk Bar and residence at Riverstone. Mrs Kelly operated the milk bar and delicatessen until 1952, with staff including Jean Phillis and Judith Drake.*

Noeleen Abell (nee Kelly) remembers moving to the shop in Riverstone: *I was only five when we came to the shop at Riverstone around 1943. I remember it being very dark and dingy, with lots of cockroaches.*

One thing that has stayed in my mind is the showcase that had the lollies in it. There was a block of wood in front of it that the children could stand on.

Mum put a lot of work into the place, cleaning it up, having it painted. She was very particular and she always had the place spotless. She also had a large refrigerator installed. It went across the length of the serving counter. It was quite something and people came from near and far to see it.

I only worked at the shop on a Saturday night at intermission and after the pictures and on Sunday. I didn't ever get to see the end of a picture, Mr Murrell used to come and let me know when the picture was about to end and I'd rush down to the shop to get ready to serve. Milk shakes, ice cream and lollies were the most popular things. The Peters ice creams used to come in big green canvas bags cooled with 'hot' ice that steamed. People could buy milk from us, they used to bring their own billy for the milk to be ladled into.

Mum loved the footballers and young people. She used to put the raffle prizes in the window for people to see and she kept the shop open late on football training nights. She didn't serve though, Bill McNamara and Brian Doolan used to get behind the counter and serve the customers while Mum did the cleaning or bookwork.

There was a little room at the end of one of the counters near the front window where the cold meat was stored. Through the week Mum made and sold sandwiches. She always made some sandwiches for Jockey Stephens, but she never charged him for them.

It was hard work and long hours operating a shop. We were open seven days a week. I can't remember Mum, Dad and I sitting down to tea together as someone always had to be in the shop. Mum employed Mrs Martin up in Crown Road do our washing. The clothes used to be packed into a case and sent up on the bus of a Thursday night, then they'd come back washed and ironed, on the bus on Saturday night. After we sold the Wattle, we moved to the Carrington Hotel at Windsor.

Jean Strachan (nee Phillis) worked at the Wattle from 1949 until around 1954: *The job was full time and I was there sometimes seven days a week and picture night as well. We used to be very busy in the afternoon as they got the crowd from the Works. Some went to the Pub but some who didn't would come to the Milk Bar for a drink before they caught the train.*

The set up was always much the same in the shop. You went in the front door and to the left were a few tables and there was a counter to the side with lollies. Then there was the main counter and over the other side there was another counter and they had a few groceries and there used to be a machine that used to cut the meat and the bread to make sandwiches.

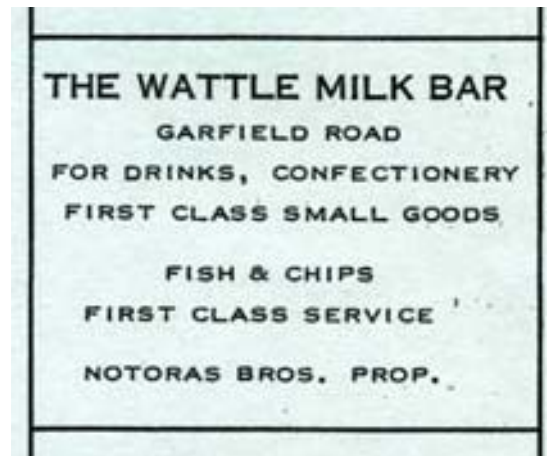
They sold pies as well. The manager of the Commercial Bank, Mr Prior, used to come in for lunch every day. There was only him and one teller in the Bank in those days.

Some nights I'd be at the pictures and at interval I'd help out at the shop. I didn't have to, but I'd go down there and they'd be flat out so I'd get in there and start serving. It just became a habit.

After Mrs Kelly got sick I worked there seven days a week. Horrie, Mr Kelly used to say to me 'hold the fort' and he'd be off for a drink and I'd be there until we closed up at nine o'clock at night. I'd be working from nine to nine. I'd put the day's takings in a billy can in the kitchen.

Horrie Kelly was a good humorous type of bloke. He loved music and there used to be a program on the wireless, the John Harper show. It would have dance music and Horrie would be swishing over the floor with the mop to the music. Mrs Kelly used to come out and turn it off and tell him it was too noisy.

Around 1952 the shop was sold to Jim Donoukos and the Kellys moved to manage the Carrington Hotel at Windsor. In 1954 the Wattle was purchased by Jack Notaras. He kept the shop as it was and various members of the Notaras family worked there over the next 27 years. Finally they decided to close the shop in order to take a long earned rest.



Ad from a 1962 Riverstone Football program.

In March 1981 the Wattle ceased to be a Milk Bar and the renovators moved in. Several months later, in May 1981, the premises opened as a hairdressers operated by Geoff Pfister.

Since then the shop has operated as a medical centre, clothing shop, manchester shop and now houses a home loan business. The building is still owned by the Notaras family, some fifty years after they purchased the original business. Although the Wattle has not operated for over twenty years, the name still brings back a lot of fond memories for several generations of Riverstone residents.

This article was compiled from information supplied by Clarrie Neal, Jean Strachan, Noeleen Abell and Emanuel Notaras.