

# PLOD ESSAY:

## ANNUAL DINNER SPEECHES: Barbara, John, Joan & Coral

The theme for the 2009 Annual Dinner was the “Wonthaggi Co-operative Distribution Society Ltd.” Irene Williams convinced some very entertaining and informative people to reveal to an enthralled audience something about their past lives in the employ of the Co-op.

As Sam Gatto explained in his opening words, the Co-op was an integral part of Wonthaggi and part of what made the town unique. Nowhere else did the workers own the shops, the dispensary, the hospital, the dentist, the bakery, the iron monger (and we could go on forever) as we did in Wonthaggi. Nowhere else was a whole town run by open meeting with the rank and file participating as equals with an equal voice.

The Co-op took on the young people of the town for casual work or as the beginning of their career as soon as they left school.



Barbara Robertson was the first to speak at the dinner. She entered the Co-op office on 4 August 1955 as 16-year-old Barbara Dakers and worked in

the Office for five years. She had to work her way up the line: “The new girl was at the first window adding docketts, giving out accounts, selling tokens, and working the addressograph machine filing daily docketts A-L, M-Z.” Once she had mastered those tasks and another new girl came to take her place, she moved onto the platform “sorting all the docketts into alphabetical and numerical order, looking after the carriers receiving and giving change to cash customers, then late in the day, doing the rounds of the departments who looked after their own cash, collecting money and organising the following day’s float.” Next, she got promoted to the accounting machine, entering every docket on to the fortnightly accounts, doing the magic square balance on paper if it didn’t balance. Every step had a method of double checking.”

The new girl – Barbara – kept getting promoted until she reached Payroll, working off two hand-ruled sheets of Foolscap pasted on the front and back of a piece of cardboard where every employee was listed. “When I was in charge of Payroll,” said, Barbara, “a penalty payment came in for working on Saturday mornings. I

made a special column for this, and saved a tedious job later if someone had Saturday leave. Agnes Muir was always the cashier with Jill Bryden filling in when Agnes had holidays.”

Life wasn’t always about counting docketts and tallying numbers: “Janet Glover reminded me of the time we had to burn old docketts in the incinerator next to the bakehouse and the ‘dunnies’. We set the grass on fire. Apparently we put it out ourselves. We were always intrigued by the grocery order each fortnight for Schmitt 754. It always included six bottles of Medallion Cough Mixture. Maybe it was for the coal dust on the lungs, or did it have some magic ingredient? Each Friday we always had to see if Mrs Shaw had a new hat. We knew that she and Bert had a tiff he would say, ‘Peg, go and buy yourself a new hat.’”

The next people to speak at the dinner were Joan Woolf and John Philp. They came to the mic as a pair, but Joan let John do most of the talking. These two worked in the grocery/dry goods department of the Co-op when they started. John started in February 1950 as soon as he left school. His first job was as a ‘gofo’ If a customer wanted a small amount of potatoes or onions or bran or pollard, he had to run to the back of the store weigh it out, put it in a brown paper bag, tie it with a string and run it back to the front of the store. When he wasn’t running to the back, he had to fill the shelves “with things like Weetbix, Vitabrits, jams. This left us very busy especially on Fridays and Saturday mornings as Friday was payday for the mines people. We also had to put currants, sultanas, and dates into one pound bags. This was done in a dingy little room at the back of Shirley’s office. We had a set of scales, a big bin to tip the fruit, which came in boxes, into.”



The hardest thing to measure was the sugar. “When things were not busy on the front counter, we had to pack the sugar. It came in a bag of about 60lbs.

This was emptied into a large drawer and then all the employees would get into a line along the back counter where we put sugar into twelve-, eight- and six-inch brown paper bags, tied the twelve- and eight-inch

bags with string, folded the sixes and stacked them on the floor.

“Each morning we had to go to the Bake House with someone else to carry the bread down to the counter where Mary Milner worked in the Bake Department. At the Bake House they had four-gallon tins of molasses for making the brown bread. If the lid wasn’t on, it was nice to dip your finger in and get a taste. The mocked cream was much the same.

“Our toilets were out in the back paddock. If things weren’t busy, great clouds of smoke came from this area.”

Finally, it was Coral Didomenico’s turn to speak and she had the audience, already warmed up by the other three, in the palm of her hand:



“I started at the Co-op in late 1963. I came to apply for the position advertised in the local paper at the prompting of my mother (Hilda Milkins). The position was

in the Gift Section of the hardware department prior to Christmas. I had just finished my Leaving Certificate exams and I think Mum may have feared that I would have too much time on my hands over the holidays to do myself any good, so prompted me to apply for the temporary position.

I remember exactly what I wore to that interview: a straight white linen skirt I had made myself and a pale blue twinset. I even then wore white high heels which makes me think I was born in them. I don’t remember much about the interview but it must have been satisfactory as I started in the Hardware Dept. the next week.

It was then that I contracted a bad case of Numbers Madness. Every shareholder in the Co-op had a number which was to be marked on all their dockets and I was supposed to know them all. Some people would give the initial of their surname and a number, others would give their name and no number; I was supposed to know or guess the rest by employing word association or clairvoyance. Often I went to sleep at night reciting as many as I could remember: A1-Avage; B7-Baughurst; B57-Bawden; C98 – Currie; C124-Clough; D12- Demo etc etc. Perhaps I should try

that now. You can let me know after if I got any of them wrong.”

Coral loved the girls she worked with:

“On a Pay Friday when the accounts were distributed from the office in the Grocery Department, Maureen liked to dress up. She came to work dressed in magnificent clothes with the most beautifully manicured and painted nails I had seen. I was in awe. Libby’s hair was always impeccable, teased into a perfect “do” which was smooth and perfect. I had never been able to control mine so it fascinated me no end. Helen was involved in all types of sport: swimming, tennis and the Surf Lifesaving Club. Her hair was always bleached by the sun and she was the epitome of the Ozzie Surfer Girl. I thought they were all just beautiful.

We talked about all sorts of things in the office: Sport (so I just listened), Politics, Religion, Fashion, Entertainment, Cooking and on and on and on. One morning Maureen dropped *The Sentinel* on the bench, pointed to the headline and said, “Look! They are going to educate the wasp!” Disbelief registered on lots of faces. Velia looked over her shoulder and laughed. “Maureen, the headline says they are going to eradicate the wasp.” We didn’t let her forget that for a long time.

Gradually I was taught all sorts of things and one of the most exciting was to go with Helen to clear the tills at the end of the day. We went to every department – even way up the back where the grain and fuel were sold. Jack Winslett looked after that section. We took the day’s dockets and the cash drawer back to the office to be locked in the safe until the next day. All sorts of things could happen. Young Harry Haddow who was an apprentice in the butchery could leave a kidney in the till to be scooped up with the pile of two shilling pieces, Jack Winslett might have found some baby mice in the sacks and left them in strategic places for optimum effect, and when “Frekkka” Fraser became manager of the furniture and men’s wear we were always at risk of being set upon from behind a great pile of fluffy rugs and mattresses he had positioned towards the back of the store. “Come on Milko” he’d say, “I’ll give you the big deal!” I don’t think he meant a discount on some furniture either.

My time at the Co-op was unforgettable. I remember with fondness all those I worked with, sadly some of them are with us no longer. The Co-op forged a strong bond in the community and some of the girls I worked with are still my very dear friends.



