

PLOD ESSAY: Durham's Grocery

When we read about the history of Wonthaggi or remember what it was like when we were kids, the Co-op, which filled a fair bit of Graham street, fills our minds and we tell stories about running into the old store with our pocket money to get a bag of broken biscuits or calling out our family number if there was nothing but air in our pockets. But there were other shops in town that served broken biscuits to school kids and measured tea out in paper bags or filled grocery orders and delivered, just as the Co-op did. These shops also had a loyal clientele that would never shop anywhere else. Durham's was one of these stores.

Collin "Red" Lamer worked in Durham's Grocery on McBride Street for 58 years. He was fourteen years old in early April 1944 when he went to work in Mr Durham's new store, only six weeks after the old store across the road had been burned to the ground.

The fire, which broke out at the back of Durham's grocery store on 25 February, destroyed four shops before it came against the brick walls of the Adelyn Factory on one side and Sutherland's Confectionary Shop on the other side and was contained. The four incinerated shops were Durham's, Davies' Newsagent, Hutt's Fish shop and Lewis's Bakery. According to the *Powlett Express*, the Firemen "did excellent work with a very poor water supply. The pressure was very bad...when the fire was at its zenith, many loud explosions could be heard coming from the rear of the buildings... soldiers and civilians [this being wartime] lent valuable assistance."

Collin's dad knew Mr Durham pretty well, since the family had never shopped anywhere else and he and Mr Durham used to spend time talking things over in the Workmen's Club. Collin's dad's cousin had a second hand furniture shop across the road from the burnt out stores that he was hoping to sell since he was getting old. Collin's dad arranged for Mr Durham to take that shop over and at the same time he asked Mr Durham if he could give his boy a job.

So that's how Collin Lamer came to be interviewed by Mr Durham for the job that would set him up for life.

"It was a formal interview," says Collin. "The first thing Mr Durham said to me was, 'If you come to work for me, you work for the public, too. You will wear a collar and tie and you will be addressed as Mr Lamer.' So, I dressed up as I was told – everyone did then; no wearing of sport shirts back then – and I became Mr Lamer from then on."

The shop Collin came to work in was a big shell with a window on the street-front and a door with a bell attached. It was fairly dark inside with wooden floors and shelves on all the walls. There was a big counter that ran the length of one side and that was where they made up the orders and where people would pick-up their goods or hand in their lists or pay their bills.

There were large tins of biscuits in front of the counter. School kids would come in during lunchtime to ask for a penny's worth. Even though Collin had only left school himself, they still called him Mr

Lamer, when they are in the shop. Mostly, Mr Durham was behind the counter while the two young fellows, Collin and Earl Jeeves, who came to work a few months after Collin started when he was demobbed from the army, lifted and carried the goods when Harry Krump (and later the Moyles) delivered them in bulk from the railway station.

These two fellows were expected to ride their bicycles on Monday mornings to different areas in the town to pick up orders from the customers. "In those days – right up until the 1970s – no one locked their doors. So, you'd go up to the back door and yell out, 'Grocery!' and walk right in the house. If no one was home, there would be a list left out on the table for me. I'd pick up maybe 20 orders and then go back to the shop to fill them.

"After the pick-up, Earl and I would spend time measuring out the goods to make up the lists. Mr Durham would stand over us while we measured. He was especially careful with the sugar, which was in a large bag high up. He



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WONTHAGGI. 'Phone 89.

would pull a string to let the sugar pour out into 4 lbs. bags. He knew exactly when to cut off the flow so the right amount of sugar went in each bag. We did the same for currents, sultanas, raisins, dates. Even pepper and salt in bags. We used balanced scales on the counter for the dry good, but outside in the back, we had big metal ones to weigh the potatoes, chook feed, bran – the big heavy things.



GROCERIES

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If people wanted vinegar or kerosene or methylated spirits or anything liquid, they would leave their own bottles or billies for us to fill.

"There was a chap who lived at the back of McDougal's who used to come into our shop to with his ¾ bottle for us to fill with 'Metho'. He would drink it!

We'd yell out, 'Hello, Mr Bradley' and go over to the bulk containers with him. His breath would just about knock us over.

"We sold carbide as well. Kids would come in to buy small lots of it. They would tip a handful into a glass bottle, which was the only kind of bottle they had then, tip water into the bottle, seal it and then throw it. It would explode and make a great noise. Lots of glass could be found in the back lanes. In the end, we stopped selling to the kids, but they still managed to get it from wherever their parents hid it."

On Tuesdays, the young men would pack their bicycles with the orders they had filled from the lists they had picked up on Mondays and deliver them. It was hard work. They would leave the Carbide outside and put things where they belonged in the kitchens, leaving chook feed out in the shed. Later, Durham's acquired a truck and hired Kippy Woodworth to drive it. All the shops delivered in those days. McDougal's had a horse and cart. Either Collin or Earl would go with Kippy to help carry the chook pellets or hay for the house cow and always the 28 lbs. of potatoes in large paper bags for each household.

"Most houses had chooks in those days. Some had a cow. Everyone had vegetable gardens, but

the most spectacular ones belonged to the Italians. The households that had miners in them had to be ready for strike or being put off. We always booked up the orders people made to our store. No one paid in cash. They usually paid their bills each payday. They would come to the big counter and say, 'What do I owe you?' The farmers would come in when they were in town. We never had any trouble. We could trust our customers, even during strikes.

"We were friendly shops and if you became our customer, you stayed with us. My parents always shopped at Durham's way before I went to work there. It was the most convenient place for us. The Co-op was big, but we never felt we had to compete with them. We had our customers.

"Quite a lot of miners dealt with us. One thing I remember was every Saturday night, the Workmen's would shut their doors at closing and the Italians would walk home down Merrick's Crescent singing the old songs."

After 32 years, Mr Durham, decided to retire. He told Earl and Collin, both of whom were still working for him, that if they looked after him, they would inherit the grocery business when he died. He died twelve months later, just about the time 'self-service' came in. The shop expanded its line of goods to keep up with the times and was taken over a couple of times, but never changed personnel.

In 2002 Collin finally retired from the same store he had worked in all his life.



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"For Quality Groceries." WONTHAGGL. Phone 89.

* Nb: These ads come from the early 1940s. Notice the phone number. Collin never said anything about customers ringing in their order. Not that many phones in Wonthaggi then, I guess.

- c.r. landon