

WOLLONGONG'S CAFÉ SCENE

By Nick Tambakis

Like Harry Mitchell, I was a descendant of Wollongong's Café scene. My recollections as a boy growing up in Wollongong in the fifties was of the following eating places:

1. The Ambassador Café was located next to Tramps by Jana three doors up from the Oxford Hotel. This Café was owned and operated by the Arthur Callegeros. After the death of Arthur the business was operated by Mr Leo Tsiamis.
2. The Oasis Milk Bar was located some three doors west of the Ambassador Café where Michaels Shoe Store currently exists. This milk bar was operated by the Simos Brothers, Con, Leo and Theo.
3. Harry Peters Fish Shop existed on the current site of the Downtown Motel. This fish and chip shop operated until 1958 when Harry passed away. Harry's nephews are the Manly Rugby League stalwarts Peter and Tony Peters, who also grew up in Wollongong.
4. The Monterey Milk Bar was located in the second shop from the south western corner of Crown and Kembla Streets in the current Lang's Building. This milk bar was initially owned and operated by Nick Sansey who later sold it to Paul Cassimaty.
5. The California Milk Bar was located in the second shop from the south east corner of Crown and Church streets. This milk bar was initially operated by the Sofios family who later sold it to the Vorias Brothers.
6. The Spot Café was located at the current Proud's entrance to Crown Central. This café was operated by Theo Pascallis until its demolition to make way for the Crown Central Shopping Centre

7. The Capitol Café was owned by Mr Tom Tasses. This shop included a Guest Cake branch along its western side.
8. Two doors west of the Capitol Café was another café whose name escapes me, also operated by a Greek family.
9. The Silver Bell Café was located on the eastern side of the Gateway entry. This café was operated by the Theodore Brothers, Peter, Harry and Theo. This family was also known as the Tambakis Bros. The Silver Bell closed down in August 1956 to make way for the Coles Store development.
10. The Black & White Milk Bar was located at the corner of Crown and Keira Streets on the current location of Smith's Kodak. This milk bar was originally operated by Tim Brown until 1956 when it was sold to the Theodore Brothers once the Silver Bell closed. This was one of the more popular milk bars in NSW. Its features included elaborate cornices of oranges and lemon trees around the walls. At the back of the shop was a cow and calf of some 1 metre in height which always brought the awe of many a young customer. The cubicles were in rich walnut veneer along the walls. The feature of the shop was an etched mirror displaying a dairy scene.
11. Opposite the Commonwealth Bank building was a Fish and Chip shop operated by the Economos family.
12. The City Delicatessen also operated a milk bar and still exists at the current site in a modified plan. This milk bar was operated by Andrew Mavromatis and George Simos. Andrew still operated the business as a well known Wollongong take away. [Two doors up from Atchison St on the South side of Crown St]
13. Across the road next to the previous location of Spearman's Cycles, existed another fish & chip shop also selling fresh fish. This shop was originally operated by the Coutas family who then sold it to the Augusou Brothers.
14. At the site of Elders Real Estate at the corner of Gladstone Avenue and Crown Street, existed another café operated by the Vlandys Brothers, Sam & Jack. A very well known personality from this business was Gloria Vlandys, very well known and much loved in Wollongong. [Central Café]
15. Near the corner of Smith and Keira Streets the Dion family operated a milk bar very popular with the school children attending Wollongong Public School and Smith's Hill High School.
16. On the corner of Victoria and Keira Streets was The Cosy Corner, operated by the Anthony family.
17. Opposite the Keira Street entry of the Gateway Centre was the Atlanta Milk Bar, operated by the Mitchell family.
18. A Fish & Chip shop existed in Keira Street next to the Black & White Milk Bar. The family and name of this shop escapes me.

Excepting the Dion Milk Bar in Keira Street all other milk bars were operated by Greek or Cypriot families.

The beginnings of this café society were very interesting, in that the early operators migrated from the island of Kythera towards the southern tip of the Peloponnese. Typical of these families were the Theodore Brothers, Peter, Harry & Theo (Tambakis). Peter originally emigrated from Kythera in the early 1920s and headed for the cane fields of Queensland. He also assisted some 3 years later his brothers Harry and Theo to emigrate. The brothers ended up working in Rockhampton working as waiters and kitchen hands for other Kytherians. There they were to learn the café trade.

The Theodore Brothers then moved to Tamworth in 1928 where they purchased and operated the Golden Bell, a café bakery in Peel Street. They stayed in Tamworth till 1933. In 1933 they moved to Wollongong and purchased the Silver Bell Café from the Sansey family (brother of Nick Sansey of the Monterey Milk Bar). Wollongong was frowned upon by many of the early business entrepreneurs as it was very much a working class town. Working class towns in those periods had stigmas attached of long strikes and poverty. It was only the more adventurous entrepreneurs who ventured to Newcastle, Wollongong, Geelong etc.

The site of the Silver Bell was sold in August 1956 to build the "new generation" Coles variety store which stood later as Wollongong Library and now as Gateway Shopping Centre.

The Theodore Brothers were then to move to the Black and White Milk Bar on the corner of Crown and Keira Streets. This milk bar operated till 1969 when Harry's death prompted the brothers to sell their business. Initially the milk bar converted to a 33 flavour ice cream parlour, then some 3 years later to a dress boutique and hence to Smith's Kodak.

The descendants of the brothers still reside in Wollongong and it was between 1996 to 1998 Kathy Tambakis operated Take & Shake in Crown Central. The descendants of the Theodore Brothers (Tambakis) pursue very different occupations.

Other families of the original café society have left the area to assist in the education of their children ie Simos Brothers, Pascallis family or have since passed on. However Andrew Movramattis (City Delicatessen) continues as one of the original operators having started in the Monterey Milk Bar in 1952. This was an era which existed with the picture theatres, ballroom dancing etc. It was nothing to line up at a café for a meal before proceeding to the pictures or dancing. The original cafés had a radio where the clientele would listen to many of the old serials. With the advent of television many of these establishments introduced television,

where patrons could watch many of the early shows, such as Bonanza, 77 Sunset Strip, Bob Dyer's Pick a Box etc.

Very few of these original places exist, one being the Paragon Café in Katoomba, another the Niagara Café in Gundagai. However a wealth of photographs depicting these establishments exists.

I hope this insight helps to feel some of the excitement and personalities of this bygone era. Milkshakes were made in stainless steel containers, milk was delivered in 100 litre aluminium vats and wasn't homogenised. Ice cream was made by each establishment in house. Fruit drinks were squeezed by hand, bread wasn't sliced and came in 2 kg loaves, flavourings were made by each establishment and each had their own secret recipe to make the biggest frothiest thickest shake. Each establishment had its own compressor to manufacture soda water for their huge frothy ice cream sodas. Fish and chips were cooked in fat and wrapped in newspaper. Meat pies were made on site. Soft drinks were made by Parkinsons our local bottler who was located in Kenny Street at the site of the Kitchen Joinery. You could buy a lolly for a cent and a meat pie for 10 cents. Illawarra Meats in Crown St, next to the Capital Café could not keep up with the supply of meat to these establishments nor could Tuppy Walker's mum who supplied fruit and vegetables from her fruit shop in Keira St opposite Supporters World. When interval occurred at the pictures these shops would pre-prepare tens of milk shakes to be served up as quickly as possible. The Crown Theatre had a capacity well into 1500. Four milk bars would serve this crowd at interval time.