

FRED HILL – A FULL CAREER IN MELBOURNE SHIPPING.

In mid-December 1949, I, together with my mother, attended a job interview with Mr Stan Mayne – Secretary of Birt Elder Pty Ltd. – Shipping Agents. The interview was successful (thank goodness!) and I commenced work on 5th January 1950.

Aged 15, my first job was Office Junior. My starting salary was Pounds 2/17/6 per week. The role consisted of collection of the mail from Elizabeth Street GPO around 8am to allow it to be sorted by 9am. By this time telegrams would be run down to Rialto P.O. – this would occur several times daily – particularly if they were urgent. Mid morning and mid afternoon the urn in the lunch room was turned on to be ready for morning and afternoon tea. Importantly, lunch orders were noted and duly collected from Blue Gum Cafe!

At the end of the day all mail – except manifests – would be taken to Elizabeth Street GPO for posting. It is pertinent to now say that from 1950 to the late 1950's Birt Elder was the biggest Ship Agency in Melbourne and the daily mail was huge – whilst the number of telegrams voluminous.

In addition, export manifests and copies Bills of Lading were posted to overseas ports sometimes twice a week – by first class airmail – and also by second class air mail (as a precaution). It also occurred that I would be asked to do private messages – one I remember clearly being to pick up 2 bottles of Fosters Lager every Thursday from the Great Britain hotel in Flinders Street for Mr Jack Harry!! Bottled beer was generally in short supply - in fact was rationed –and availability was not helped by many wildcat strikes!

There were frequent visits to Melbourne Harbour Trust for berth applications and to H.M. Customs and the Mercantile Marine Office in the old Rialto building.

At the start of each week a self audit of petty cash and postage stamps was performed and presented to the office accountant – Mr Pickford. It should be noted that dress standard was suit, collar and tie – although sports clothes were permitted on Saturdays! If one was summoned to Mr Nichols' office a coat was always worn.

After some 3-4 months I was transferred to the Accounts section as Department Junior. I don't recall a great deal about the role – I was probably not Accounts material! After a short time I was transferred – this time to the Outward Freight Section – again as Section Junior. This role was to produce much satisfaction. The prime responsibility was the rubber stamping of Bills of Lading. Bills were presented by Shippers (or their agents) and generally had a requirement of 2 originals and several office copies. Each original had a 6d duty stamp which was cancelled by a Birt Elder rubber stamp. Other rubber stamps were used to cover a variety of

circumstances. Some that I recall: "On deck at shippers risk"; "Second hand drums"; "Not accountable for leakage"; and "Marks said to be". This latter stamp was for crates of rabbits which were only about 12cm deep.

Bills were then on passed to a senior who checked freight rate and then onto a comptometrist (!) to check calculations – and finally to a manager for signature.

It should be noted that on occasions a shipper would make a mistake causing Bills to be replaced. Assuming the replacement Bill had a fresh duty stamp I would souvenir the cancelled stamp. These would then be reused when Bills were presented without stamps, the Shipper charged cash and the proceeds towards the Xmas present for the manifest typist!!

The variety and quantity of Bills of Lading presented was frequently huge as follows:

MANZ Line (Federal/NZS vessels)	-	To East coast Nth America, Canada and BWI.
Federal Service (Federal.NZS vessels)	-	To Med/UK/Continent.
Australind/Avenue vessels	-	To UK/Continent
Swedish Australia Line (Transatlantic vessels)		To Continent/Scandinavia.
Pacific Australia Direct (PAD)		To West Coast USA/Canada
Australia/China Line (Jardine Matheson)		To Manila/HongKong/Japan

Other tasks included delivering and obtaining signatures to Booking Notes/Contracts to fresh fruit and cereal shippers. Notes always showed vessel, quantity and freight rate. In addition, subject to vessels being alongside, company flags were to be raised and lowered daily except when special events dictated otherwise...i.e. The Queen's Coronation! (The Union Jack to feature singly). In my spare time I used to help Lionel Hand to stamp up his wool orders.

As I mentioned earlier, my starting salary was Pounds 2/17/6 which rose to about 4 Pounds a week by November 1950.....when out of the blue I received a pay packet of in excess of 20 pounds!! Fearing a mistake I approached our Accountant Mr Pickford only to be informed the Company had granted a bonus of 10% to all staff! This continued for some years.

I remained in this position until late 1951 when it was announced that Lionel Hand had resigned and was joining Dreyfus – a leading wool shipper. I then took over as wool clerk and again this role would give enormous satisfaction.

The wool selling season went from September to June and was the prime shipment period. There were 3 major selling centres – Melbourne Geelong and Albury consisting of 8, 4, and 3 brokers respectively and 2 minor centres in Ballarat and Portland. Vessels had already been scheduled to serve these sales and wool canvassers generally already had sufficient covers from a host of buyers/shippers. The morning after the sale finished the canvasser would make contact with the shippers to firm up covers. I

would then enter the scene requesting prompt lodgement of wool orders – these were documents indicating brand, bale numbers, and countermark required, intended vessel and discharge port. On receipt, wool orders were sorted by broker and endorsed with dumping requirement – generally 3 bands but sometimes 4 bands when vessel space was tight.

The orders were then delivered to OSRA wool Clearing House – who coordinated all wool deliveries to the port. They were then entered onto a port master plan and despatched to the various brokers advising ship's berth and receipt dates.

3.

The Clearing House would contact brokers daily agreeing their delivery target. With some frequency, some broker's dump capacity could not cope in the prescribed time and instructions would then be issued to deliver the surplus to designated Dumpers. There were four – Wool Press, DeVille, Victorian Stevedores and Wm. Haughton "B" shed.

In the case of Geelong and Albury, the procedures were relatively straight forward. Geelong wool was carted by road and by only one carrier – Blakiston. At that time Albury brokers had no dump facility and their wool was carted un-dumped by road to one or other of the 4 Melbourne Dumps.

The orders when received back from the Clearing House would be entered by pencil onto a master sheet. Once the vessel commenced receipts, a copy of the master sheet (updated progressively) would be forwarded to the Bridgfords receiving clerk. The quantity expected daily would be advised to the Birt Elder Traffic Officer who would then arrange for sufficient WWF Receivers/equipment.

On the final day of receipts I was allowed to check outstanding figures with Brokers/Dumpers. Other than on final day, contact was always through the Clearing House. On completion of receipts the master sheet was inked in and in due course dumping and cartage accounts would be received, checked, paid and endorsed on the master sheet.

Please note a few items of interest:-

- 1) Up until 1951 (I think) there were 2 methods of transporting wool from Geelong. The main method was by road and the other by lighter provided by the Victorian Lighterage Company (Fred Dickson). This system was abandoned after a sinking in the Bay in 1951
- 2) Government intervention occurred even then!! An edict was made around 1954 stipulating all wool from Geelong had to be transported by rail to Melbourne regardless whether the vessel was berthed at a rail serviced berth or not! In the case of a non rail berth, wool was railed to Cowper Street Rail Siding and then transferred to Road vehicles. However it became quickly apparent that VICRail could not cope – (thank goodness!) – and the situation reverted to a mixture of road and rail.

3) Dumps were finally installed at the Albury broker around 1954 – an enormous saving in transport costs.

A benefit to wool exporters offered by the Australia Europe Shipping Conference (AESC) service was a loyalty rebate, this being earned by all shipments made on Conference vessels throughout the year. Rebates were 1/9d per bale greasy and 1/6d per bale treated. Shipments would be audited by Overseas Shipowners Representative Association (OSRA). Lines were responsible to submit to OSRA their shipment history on a ship by ship basis and at the end of the financial year, Lines would fund OSRA to compensate shippers.

For all Lines to our Agency (except Jardine Matheson) shippers were entitled to a 7% freight rebate. An innovation I introduced was the drawing of the rebate cheque for attaching to the Bill of Lading due for release. This made sense from a marketing point of view and was hugely popular with shippers. Just to indicate how big our Agency was I can recall handling 4 vessels simultaneously as follows:

“Treglisson” (on a Federal Berth)	12000 bales
“Boogabilla”	11000 bales
A MANZ Line vessel	1500 bales
A Jardine Matheson Vessel	<u>4000 bales</u>
	<u>28500 bales!</u>

However mistakes can occur and I was responsible for a beauty! A short shipment of 3 bales (not my fault!) had occurred on a Swedish vessel. As was the practice, “Full Bills of Lading” were issued - with Birt Elder to take out Bills on the on-carrying vessel.

You guessed it! I forgot the 3 bales which now had the dubious record of being shortshipped twice!!

My time as the Wool Clerk was from 1952 to 1955 with a break in the winter of 1953 as a result of National Service. As a matter of interest my wage at Birt Elder was greater than the Army paid and the Company met the difference! The experience gained in this role was invaluable and the job satisfaction incredible. I had established relationships with many wool exporters; Representatives from brokers and Dumpers; OSRA Wool Clearing House; Road Transport Carriers, VIC Rail and many Bridgford clerks.

In 1956 I was promoted to No.2 in the Outward Freight Dept. With prime responsibility for:-

- 1) Quotation of Freight rates
- 2) Amend all Freight Tariffs as required.
- 3) Countercheck all Bills of lading just prior to signature
- 4) Checking and timely despatch of all manifests to head Office and all Discharge Ports.

This was a time consuming and mundane sort of role, however there were still events worthy of mention. Around 1954 and lasting some 3-4 years, there were extreme drought conditions experienced in North and South America - such that these regions experienced an acute shortage of meat for local consumption. As a result, MANZ Line vessels which previously lifted mainly dry cargoes came under extreme pressure to accept maximum quantities of meat.

The 3 Lines that comprised MANZ were The N.Z. Shipping Co. (Birt Elder); Port Line (Gibbs Bright) and Ellerman & Bucknell (Wm. Crosby) – all vessels with prolific reefer space. Nonetheless there was still insufficient tonnage to meet the urgent demand – in fact “Magga Dan” (an icebreaker) was chartered in under our agency and lifted some 3000 tons of meat.

With such huge demands, the decision was taken to give priority to the regular major supporters – i.e. some 50% shared to Angliss, Borthwick and Smorgan. The remaining space was shared between some 20 other shippers. Obviously some were disgruntled claiming lost sales! As is generally the case when there is a huge export demand, local meat costs sky rocketed !

Early on – perhaps after the 3rd sailing - a problem became apparent. Instead of a recognised stowage factor being achieved, this was supposedly increased – resulting in greater space utilisation. Investigations revealed that prior to the upsurge bookings were made on a per carton basis – the logic being that a carton was snugly packed with 56lbs net and around 60lbs gross. The most common method of booking was that 280 cartons weighed 7.5 tons net and 560 cartons weighed 15 tons net.

What transpired was that all exporters over-packed the cartons to an extent that the 280 cartons realised something like 8.5 tons! This resulted in a massive spike in actual tons lifted with the flow on result being that lifting at other load ports was reduced leading to short shipments and much unhappiness!! This was corrected by accepting bookings on a declared weight basis – which was the standard practice elsewhere.

Another event worthy of mention: There was a scrap metal exporter with a somewhat dubious reputation who insisted on his Bill of Lading to be endorsed “Freight pre-paid” and Initialled by the signatory – claiming it was stipulated in his letter of credit. However, our instructions were clear – that company’s cheque was not acceptable! Payment was required by Bank Cheque or cash! Shipper became most indignant and marched out to return with 78 pounds made up in 2 shilling pieces!! It was nonetheless legal tender!

In 1959, one of the great local shipping men – Maurice Marshall – resigned to take up a senior management position with the Chamber of Commerce. This resulted in several changes and I was promoted to Traffic Officer for discharging vessels. The number of vessels handled was huge. Not only did we handle Avenue/ Australind/ Federal / NZSCo /Swedish

Australia/PAD and Jardine Matheson but we also acted for Ellerman & Bucknell also Clan and Shire Line Southbound along with Hain Steamship, Athel Line and the Royal Fleet Auxillary. Unfortunately, about this time all MANZ Line vessels were placed to the agency of Gibbs Bright.

The modus operandi was along the following lines:

- 1) Berth Application lodged.
- 2) Bay Plans received and lodged with Stevedores.
- 3) Estimate of hours on each hook received back from stevedores
- 4) We would then calculate how much labour we would require and how much overtime to be worked to allow vessel to sail by advertised date. Once alongside, this would be monitored allowing for delays due rain, strikes and shortage of labour.
- 5)

When vessel was within 24 hours of port the following would be advised...Tug Control, Pilots, Boatman, HMC, Harbour Trust and Dock men. This was before the advent of modern day Harbour Control!

The same procedure applied prior to departure. Whilst in port the Agent was responsible for most aspects of ship husbandry – Mail – Cash Advances – crew to Doctor/Dentist – crew signing on/off etc.

A couple of instances are worthy of mention.....

“Whakatane” ETD 1959 Melbourne Cup Day 0600 hrs.

I arrived vessel with Clearance, Articles, mail etc. and was to depart vessel only to find gang way up and partly secured.! For whatever reason, Captain Oscar Brittain refused to lower the gangway – maybe to impress the cadets on board? Thus I had to descend via Jacobs ladder only problem being a strong north wind blowing the ship off the berth! It was necessary for the Tugs to push the ship onto the berth with Mr Dave Kinsman - South Wharf Head Dockman telling me when to jump!! Not a great way to start a npublic holiday?

On another occasion I looked after a Swede “Peter Nielsen” again berthed at South wharf and due to sail on a Friday afternoon. I arrived at the berth but had forgotten the ship’s Clearance and Articles – what a dill! However a quick phone call from the head Dockman’s office – again Mr Dave Kinsman – and the papers duly arrived by a civic taxi! Only problem was I had sat on the Head Dockman’s desk and broken his glasses!!

What a miserable day – which went from bad to worse! I can remember visiting 3 RFA vessels at Williamstown moored alongside one another. What was significant? Their bar opened on board at an unheard of 0900 hrs and thus provided solace!!!

It was during this role I received my first invitation to the annual Bridgford’s “Smoke Night” at the lower Melbourne Town Hall where the clerks would entertain Shipping Agents and Stevedoring Supervisors – a great night!

In 1961 Mr Jack Harry was transferred to Port Kembla as Office Manager. I was promoted to Traffic Officer for loading vessels, working alongside Stan Jeffery and responsible to John Hunter who was far and away the best shipping man I knew. This began an amazing adventure and the role went something like this:-

1. Berth application lodged with MHT some 2/3 weeks prior to vessel ETA requesting berth preference.
2. Vessel to be provided with progressive booking lists and to eventually advise proposed stowages.
3. MHT advises berth.
4. Cargo ordered out – other than rail or reefer. Rail probably ordered earlier with reefer the day before as a rule.
5. Booking list to Bridgford's clerk.
6. Receipts generally commence 2 working days prior ETA. Agent responsible for ordering WWF Receivers, pallets, forklifts etc.
7. Proposed stowages received from vessel leading to discussion with Stevedoring Supervisor on how best to work the vessel.
8. Clerk prepares daily receipt return. Please note that there was no such thing as receipt cut-off in those days. Cargo was received frequently over the last 48/24 hours.
9. Vessel berths – discussions with cargo officer and endeavour to reduce the big hook. Occasionally berth unavailable on arrival and necessary to visit at Bay anchorage.
10. Vessel ship working monitored closely with particular emphasis on reefer, which was rarely worked on midnight shift except as an overflow.
11. Vessel completed work and sails - despatch telegrams to Head Office and next port advising time sailed, ETA, draft, lifting available, space by compartment and any additional requirements e.g. cleaners, carpenters, dunnage, Lloyds for cleanliness or opening temperatures etc.
12. In due course invoices for stevedoring, clerical services, rail demurrage etc received, checked and passed for payment.

Type of Berth:

Federal/NZS vessels frequently attracted large reefer loadings – mostly carted by road.

Large quantities of canned and dried fruit were invariably received by rail they were big wool carriers. Thus, Princes or Station pier was desirable because of wide apron and minimal rail shunting as opposed to Victoria dock, Also there was less draft restriction at Port Melbourne. If a vessel's overall length exceeded 450 feet, sailing after dark was allowable – not so up river.

Appleton dock and 16-24 Victoria dock were the ideal berths for the Transatlantic vessels because of large quantities of wool and sheepskins. The limited general and reefer were mainly received by road. The exception was in the fresh fruit season when Transatlantic were prolific carrier of

pears and apples to Scandinavia. In peak seasons when there was insufficient tonnage to lift all fruit offering, Transatlantic would charter in fully refrigerated vessels, more often than not from Maersk. These would be ideally suited to an open berth with a wide expanse of apron. A timber berth at South Wharf would often be used.

PAD vessels were not big carriers out of Melbourne lifting small quantities of general, reefer and wool and occasionally dried fruit – therefore just about any berth in the port would suffice.

Jardine Matheson vessels were one call only, small discharge – between 500-800 tons – but fairly big loaders consisting of malt, flour, general, scrap metal, wool and small reefer. As a rule any berth in Victoria dock except if rail required then 16-24 Victoria dock.

There are several examples of getting to know how Exporters and suppliers want to operate, at the same time making them aware of how you wanted your ship worked.

Example #1: Every second Monday a meeting was convened by Australian Dairy Board to review how current butter receipts were progressing and to outline immediate future requirements. The meeting was chaired by Laurie McLeod and present were all members of AESC who had upcoming butter allocations along with the major cool stores Victorian Butter Factory, Metro Ice, Woodmasons and Government cool stores. Obviously, it was every body's desire to fill – or if possible exceed allocation. Our philosophy was, particularly when you had a big hook, to get on side with Charlie Daly of GCS (then the biggest of the cool stores). The theory was he was and we were receptive to working Sundays. Some agents/owners said the additional overtime cost was not worth it, however we as a rule filled allocation and frequently exceeded it. Even if only by several hundred cartons this went a long way to paying the overtime which was generally necessary anyway. Another advantage was that GCS ran both a road and rail operation thus allowing ship working to be delay free.

Example #2: Again with the proviso of a big hook and with Smorgan's having a big meat booking it would pay to pursue John (Smorgan) Smith to work Sunday and if agreed, full Smorgan allocation was achieved and frequently bettered. In those days Sunday labour was ordered on a Thursday – to be confirmed Friday morning. John was not normally in the office Thursday afternoon but it was a fair bet he would be in Menzies' Saloon Bar and thus Sunday labour was quickly confirmed!!

Almost every vessel had a story and some of these are as follows:-

“Coolgardie” a small Transatlantic vessel on the PAD run loaded some 200 tons meat at Portland in late 1961. This was the first Swede to visit Portland for many years, therefore a lunch was held on board with local identities, Mayor, Harbour Master, HMC, Borthwicks and Portland Wool Brokers – much beer and aquavit and a magnificent meal. Vessel sailed for Melbourne around 1700. I realised I had (had) more than enough to drink, got the

“Razors edge” from the ships library read 2 pages and was seasick from 1730 for the next 10 hours until arrival Port Phillip Heads!!

Example #3: “Goonawarra” was another Swedish vessel on a PAD run and loaded meat and wool at Portland before proceeding (with me on board) to Melbourne. A much more comfortable trip than “Coolgardie”!! “Goonawarra” was on her 2nd voyage to Australia and unbeknown to the agents was having electrical problems with steering. The inevitable happened and she broke down but thank goodness it was after we passed through the Heads. Fortunately, technicians from the Service Company responsible (ASEA) were on board and were able to quickly correct.

Example #4: “Nottingham” arrived Portland 23/12/1966 to load some 1500 bales wool. At 0800 next day there were still some 500 bales to load, labour had to be ashore by 1130 and even though Portland labour was so much better than Melbourne it was still a mammoth task. Tommy Deagon, a United Stevedoring foreman who seemed to be on duty for every United sailing at Portland, strongly recommended to supervisor Dick Williams a couple of kegs of beer in the mess room would help! Dick acted - and the ship was finished at 1030!! It is worthy of mention, most of the labour in those days were casual, non-union and largely consisted of local farmers all keen to supplement their income - and most of them were known to Tommy!

Not every sailing was a success story. In 1964 I handled “Papanui” berthed at Princes Pier and loaded a large quantity of canned and dried fruit, wool, butter and meat. Again, it was necessary to work Sunday and around the 1500 smoko I received a phone call from Head Clerk Max Ramsay advising the good news that all the butter was loaded with the labour being transferred to general. The bad news - a nasty storm is looming!

Around 1730 I received a phone call from the Chief Officer at the Port of Melbourne Police Station! A terrible accident had occurred. The master, together with the third and 6th engineers had been sailing in a borrowed small yacht which had overturned drowning the 3rd engineer - Rod Morrison. I had first met him when he was 2nd engineer on the then new “Somerset”. The reason he was on board “Papanui”? He had to serve time on a steam ship to achieve Chief Engineer status!!

Then there was “Killara” on her 2nd voyage as a multi- purpose vessel - RoRo with a big fork underdeck and travelling crane on deck. Unfortunately Transatlantic called tenders for these multi-purpose vessels and Melbourne Stevedoring won the contract. The physical part of the operation was OK but the clerical side a disaster! To what extent we never did find out - “Killara” was caught in the Suez Canal in the 1966/67 crisis - and our doors at Birt Elder had shut 30/06/1967!!

One frequent recurring shipment on Transatlantic and Jardine Matheson vessels was bags of wet cattle hides. More often than not around the 30 - 50 ton mark and obviously requiring a dirty stow - always in a tween deck and

averaging a stowage factor of 65 feet, stowed generally around 7-8 bags high. Then in 1963/64 trade resumed with Shanghai and "Eastern Saga" benefited from a huge booking of some 500 tons. This necessitated utilisation of 1 lower hold with excess into the lower tween deck. You live and learn!

Not only was there no overflow – the lower hold was never filled! Excessive weight forced most of the brine from the hides and a stowage factor of more like 45 feet - not 65 feet! Outturn must have been OK – there was never any query from Shanghai.

In October 1964, I handled "Merryn Elizabeth" on charter to Jardine Matheson. Rotation was as usual Sydney discharge; Melbourne discharge and load; Sydney load and Brisbane discharge and load. Vessel was scheduled for Manila and Hong Kong and in Melbourne was scheduled to discharge about 500 tons and to load 800 tons malt and 1400 tons general. Some 2-3 days after commencement of work the Australian Northbound Shipping Conference (ANSCON) received an urgent request for 1800 tons malt to be shipped ASAP to Saigon. John Hunter (my boss) and myself hurried to the vessel advising of the urgency and in fact helping the Chief Officer (who was not a young man) to theoretically stow the 1800 tons. The ship confirmed OK the following morning. Thus the rotation of load for discharge was now Manila, Hong Kong, and Saigon. The 3 malt suppliers Joe White, Smith Mitchell and Barrett Burston were each allocated 600 tons and delivery to the wharf commenced that day. As loading had already commenced and Brisbane discharge was still untouched ground space was somewhat limited. Most of the Saigon malt was stowed in No.2 and No 4 lower holds. The remainder in various stows in #1, #3, and #5

Some 2-3 weeks after vessel had finalled from Brisbane, Head Office received a rebuke from Jardine's! Apparently it had been necessary after discharge had completed in Manila, to transfer some 200 tons Saigon malt each from #2 and #4 into #3 lower hold. At the same time they were bunkering at what was probably the most expensive bunkering port in the world!

We were never made aware of any complaint from the vessel – obviously the Chief Officer was under some pressure – but surely it was his responsibility to stow a safe ship??

And then there was "Cumulus" sailed from 14 North wharf at 0600 on a Saturday for Adelaide. After vessel had swung and stern line cleared the propeller we (John Hunter and myself) proceeded back to the office to send despatch telegrams to Adelaide and Head Office. That was completed and we were just about to go home when a phone call from Tug control advised us that the ship had gone aground close to the mouth of the river and tugs were trying to free her! We immediately set forth to Williamstown and upon arrival found that the ship had been freed and was berthing at Nelson pier. Head Office, Adelaide and Gothenburg were informed, insurance surveyor,

Lloyds and divers attending, vessel ultimately given the all clear – no serious damage - and ultimately sailed around 1930 Saturday. How did it happen?? The speed limit in the river in those days was 4 knots – but – it would seem the speed limit was somewhat exceeded and the vessel lost control!!

There was a strong rumour the Master had an appointment with a lady in Adelaide on Sunday night and it was touch and go whether vessel could arrive Semaphore in daylight! Otherwise he could not berth until Monday morning.

As I said earlier nearly every ship has a story – but what about the shore side characters?

Frequently the following met in Menzies Saloon Bar on a week night between 1700 up to closing time at 1800 – otherwise known as the 6 o'clock swill! From Birt Elder there were Stan Jeffery, John Hunter, Fred Johnson and myself; from Gibbs Bright –Phil Doran, Phil Kelly, Percy Wallbridge; from Sanderson's - Neville Devine; from Blue Star - Lionel Johnstone; from Dalgety – Ben Scarfe (undoubtedly Melbourne's tanker expert); from Bunge/Shiptraco/Columbus – Alan Ralph and from Heine Bros – George Paterson.

To illustrate the calibre of the people employed at Birt Elder during my time (1950-1967) led by Jack Nichols (Manager) – eventually a Director of P & O. Stan Mayne was Secretary and became the first Melbourne manager (and Victorian Director) when OCAL was born and subsequently Chairman of the Port of Melbourne Authority. Maurice Marshal was Manager Outward Trades before taking up a senior management role in the Chamber of Commerce. Ernie Woods was responsible for Crew and Customs before becoming the first manager of Sitmar Line in Melbourne. Brian Haywood was the wool canvasser then State Manager for Trans Austral. Barry McDonald held Traffic Officer for discharging vessels then to Marketing manager in OCAL Melbourne. And then of course, John Hunter as Manager Outward Traffic and then taking on the challenging task setting up a stevedoring/clerical operation in Saigon from 1965- 1968 and later to become a director of Trans Austral/ Transatlantic.

Job satisfaction was immense with constant liaison with exporters, customs agents, suppliers, cool stores, carriers, V/Line, Customs, Fred Hansen (our boatman), Melbourne Harbour Trust (all levels), tug operators, pilots, Bridgfords' clerks, and supervisors from United and Victorian Stevedores. Importantly was the constant contact with Ship's personnel.

One of the most rewarding sights was vessels on the Federal berth finalling from Melbourne full and down! Or with Transatlantic vessels full - with maximum deck load of wool. I think it is fair to say we worked hard but enjoyed the results.

The Birt Elder office doors were shut for good on 30 June 1967 – with some people commencing with OCAL and others to P&O on standby for OCAL. Some moved to P&O permanently and others to McIlwraith McEacharn who took over the Transatlantic agency.

Of course the NZS/Federal vessels went to P&O whilst we lost the Jardine Matheson agency to H.C.Sleigh in 1965.

I commenced with P&O freight department on 1 July 1967 as liaison officer and handled “Ballarat”, “Bendigo”, “Baradene” and “Balranald” while showing other liaison officers the vagaries of the Federal/NZS vessels – particularly with reefer. In November 1967 I commenced with OCAL but shortly after was recalled to P&O!

Finally I commenced permanently with OCAL in March 1968.

Along with 6-8 others our initial role was to explain our business to clients. I can remember going to Mildura then to Robinvale, Irymple and Redcliffs for discussion with the Dried Fruit people. Then a joint trip with ACTA to the Mornington Peninsular to see the fresh fruit suppliers. Two events from this period stand out:

1. We had a 20’ G.P. container positioned on the National Mutual forecourt and manned by us from 0900 to 1700hrs daily for the benefit of the general public.
2. The testing of clip-on-units which were necessary shoreside to provide power to our porthole insulated containers. A container with C-O-U attached (and on power) was “stuck up” on a Mayne Nickless trailer for some weeks’ with readings to be taken every 4 hours! This monitoring role was shares around - but no fun at 4am!

My role at the commencement of the OCL service was as OCAL Depot manager situated at Seatainer Terminals Ltd (STL) - Dudley street – and with a staff of 8 – this being due to the unpreparedness of Exporters and Importers to handle containers as FCL – and the relative inexperience of the STL staff.

Several items are worthy of recall:

1. The plethora of unions involved as follows:-
 1. Storeman and Packers - cargo handling.
 2. Transport worker - Forklift drivers.
 3. Federated clerks - Tallying.
 4. Fed. Engine drivers & firemen - Overhead crane drivers.
 5. Stevedoring Foremen & Supervisors -Foremen & Supervisors.
 6. Shipping Officers Assn. - STL office staff.
 7. Miscellaneous Workers _ Watchmen.

2. One union in particular was rogue! The Storemen and Packers were probably on strike for a total of at least 6-8 weeks in the first 12 months of operation. As a result, the Depot was frequently unworkable and at such times OCAL staff faced considerable difficulty and frustration - yet found relief in a game of cricket!
An item of interest occurred during a meeting of the S & P's to discuss continuation of a stoppage or return to work. They were addressed by an official union organiser who recommended they return to work and became visibly and vocally frustrated with the troops and their eventual rebuttal of his recommendation - a young Simon Crean!!
3. The second voyage of "Encounter Bay" occurred during one of the strike periods. We - along with STL managed to get approval from the ACTU to unpack at BSC Montague Rail shed. Whilst this operation was necessary it was most unwieldy due to limited cargo handling space. It took some ¾ weeks to unpack the approximately 150 containers involved. Frequently, cargo had to be delivered to clear floor space for more unpacking to occur! The "bonding" after "time - up" was a nightmare! Balancing was ultimately achieved between our Gerry Boggan and BSC 's Charlie Doogood. Unfortunately Charlie collapsed and died the day after bonding!
4. "Flinders Bay" maiden voyage was a huge load through the Depot - almost all of which could have been packed as FCL. 70 odd containers of Heinze baby food - Tom Piper's 30 containers of canned meat - some 20 containers of sheepskins (for Glasgow?) - and other shipments of general . In addition, the refrigerated cargoes of meat and fresh fruit - at that stage the only shipper of fruit who could pack FCL was "Blue Moon".
5. Antique furniture seemed to be on every southbound sailing and invariably incurred some damage! Depot staff really had no idea as to how or why?

My next role was a promotion to Container Movements Manager responsible for Container control, empty storage and handling, Repair and Maintenance, cleaning and pre-trip. Additionally, other functions included national and International imbalance, all transport of empties and the FCL zone haulage operation. At that stage, apart from empties stored at STL Depot and Terminal (where "normal" storage rates existed) our only other area to store, repair and clean empties was at Atlas Transport situated immediately south of STL Terminal. I was fortunate to inherit a free storage area, and, as our operation grew, I was able to negotiate similar free storage rates with other areas.

There were several concerns with this role - providing "extra" clean containers for packing Rice, Canned fruit, Dried fruit, and having to rely on STL empty pool area when loading to rail and of course V/Line to supply shunting crews. More often than not it was necessary to supply Tasmania with integral reefers for Far East exports. We were generally able to arrange free imbalance by supplying empty containers to Freight Forwarders for their domestic traffic.

Hitherto they had to hire equipment, so everyone benefited.

One other memory I recall fairly clearly – I was at work one Saturday morning in the OCAL office located in the STL Terminal and a Baby “BAY” was alongside with ETD later that morning. A call from Head Office advised that previously “Full bookings” had fallen away to the extent the vessel would sail with 20 OCL slots vacant – a costly embarrassment! Can you supply 10 x 40’ container empties? The answer was “YES” – Atlas was open but no trucks available from our main contractor – E.A.Rocke. I then stopped a driver departing the Terminal with an empty 40’ rig and we did a deal! He would cart our containers – but for cash! The operation went like this – the truck was loaded at Atlas (which was sited at the south end of the Terminal) proceeded out the Atlas “IN” gate, through the STL “OUT” gate then onto No.1 berth under the Portainer and loaded on board! The whole operation took some 60-90 minutes compared to the normal operation i.e. arrive “IN” gate, processed in the computer, proceed to South Park, received with Straddle, loaded to ITV (internal terminal vehicle), then to #1 Portainer and loaded to vessel – an operation almost certainly to take in excess of 3 hours!

The main people at STL were extremely co-operative. However when work resumed on Monday morning the 2 unions involved (WWF and FCU) were furious and Terminal Senior management were both horrified and apologetic!

My next role from 1980 was as Traffic manager with the additional responsibilities for the receipt and delivery of all full container exports and imports, including all interstate feed. The major problems as I recall were queues – sometimes taking 3-4 hours to clear – a situation that the industry has never been able to come to grips with – and Adelaide feed. It was important to clear Adelaide imports ASAP after discharge. Shipowners were under increasing pressure to provide direct calls. It was also during this period that STL Depot – Dudley Street – ceased operation. STL then took over the block then under Atlas Transport control and then transferred the pack/unpack of LCL to this area which was under WWF control. This of course presented us with a problem. Our major empty area ceased to exist! We then started our own empty area on the corner of McKenzie Road and Coode Street named Bay Container Services in which I became heavily involved.

In 1987 I was promoted to Operations Manager. There were obviously lots of issues but consistently the major problem was shipworking in Melbourne Terminals did not compare favourably with overseas terminals. In this regard it was agreed at a high level that shipowners should have the authority to transfer vessels from one terminal to another – if there was to be sufficient gain to vessels despatch. Thus TUSC was instigated (Terminal Users Steering Committee) comprising all members of ANZESC (OCL, ACTA, SEABRIDGE, ANL) and separately

SCANCARRIERS and of which I was appointed Chairman. We would meet weekly with the principal Terminal operators – STL (now Conaust) and TOT.

TUSC was not toothless and several vessels were transferred over 3-4 year period- generally from Conaust to TOT. The Conaust operation was frequently a 3 ship affair – compared to TOT's one ship operation.

With a change of management at Conaust came a range of new philosophies including trying to fix the road queue problem. It was generally agreed between Conaust and most road operators that there would be merit in time slots. However for this to be workable full time supervision was essential. Conaust agreed to share part of the cost with the remainder shared by the carriers on a pro-rata basis.

Without doubt there was definite improvement – whilst those carriers who refused to participate were directed to a random queue. Another major event to occur during this period was the formation of an OCAL managed transport company involving King Transport and a group of sub-contractors successfully run by Laurie Ogilvie. Again I was heavily involved and to a degree we managed to keep a lid on costs. But importantly it enabled closer working relationships with our clients.

In summary, the OCL container service commenced to/from UK/Continent in 1969. Shortly after the Far East services followed and around 1977 the service from Australia to/from South East Asia. This was followed by the Indian/sub continent and Middle East/Gulf. In 1985 the service to Far East was extended to China and in 1989/90 , with the acquisition of ACTA, not only did our UK/Continent trade shares increase, but services were taken over to both East and West coast North America and to/from New Zealand. We were then by far the biggest container operator in Australia.

On 31 March 1996 I retired voluntarily after 46 years 3 months in the industry.

Not bad for someone who failed his intermediate (year 10)!!

E & O E. Fred Hill