

OPEN FOUNDATION

AUSTRALIAN HISTORY
CLASS - 1.00 P.M. - 3.00 P.M.
TUESDAY'S
MARGARET HENRY

NAME: LYNNE BONSER
SUBJECT: REGIONAL HISTORY ASSIGNMENT
TOPIC: A GONINAN & CO LIMITED
LENGTH: ESSAY - 1000 WORDS

DUE DATE: WEEK ENDING 25th AUGUST 1989
DATE SUBMITTED: 22 nd AUGUST 1989

Alfred Goninan, originally of Cornwall, United Kingdom, a mining engineer and entrepreneur of outstanding ability was the founder of the Company A Goninan & Co Limited.

'Alfred Goninan arrived in Newcastle in 1899¹ and immediately recognised the city's business potential. Every year new coal fields were being opened up in the area and the small city was bustling with the commercial activity this brought on. Alfred Goninans' business idea took shape. He would start up an engineering enterprise servicing the coal industry in and around Newcastle. 'In May 1899, a five and a half acre leasehold was acquired at Wickham.'² A few months later the first employee was hired. Two years later Alfred Goninans brother Ralph, on his return from the New Guinea gold fields, joined the company.

In the first years the manufacture concentrated on coal mining equipment. The major activity was manufacture of skips and wagons for the transportation of coal. This business was successful and expanded very rapidly. 'To provide sufficient funds for expansion the two brothers decided in 1905 to change their partnership into a private company.'³

A major concern of Alfred Goninans was the company's development and keeping ahead of competitors. 'In an address to shareholders in 1909, he states this policy, " It becomes essential that the whole of the mechanical design should be of the latest and most up-to-date design".'⁴ Goninans' progressive image began to form in the community.

During the first World War supplies became more and more scarce, in particular of wheels and axles, a vital part of Goninans wagon business. To solve this problem, 'Goninans together with four other companies, among them Howard Smith, set up a new steel plant in Waratah.'⁵ The Commonwealth Steel Products Company Ltd produced its first wheel and axle set in 1920. The Goninan shares in the company were later sold to BHP, although Alfred Goninan kept his seat on the Board of Directors.

1. Minutes of A Goninan & Co Meetings.
2. Ibid
3. Ibid
4. Ibid
5. Ibid

To supply the engineering requisites to the collieries the 'Goninan brothers set up Engineers and Colliery Supplies Co Limited in 1910.'⁶ At this time , the rapid expansion of A Goninan & Co Limited had started and eventually the Company outgrew its Wickham premises. 'New workshops were built on a twenty nine acre site at Broadmeadow and were ready in late 1919.'⁷ Some ten years later Engineers and Colliery Supplies Co Limited took over the vacated site in Wickham. The new plant facilities were the most modern then available in Australia. They comprised both fabrication and machine shops and had railway lines laid throughout to facilitate the handling of raw materials and products. The Company's new head office was reputedly the second largest administrative building in the Newcastle district.

By the mid 1920's the facilities of A Goninan & Co Limited comprised a boiler shop, a foundry including a brass foundry, pattern shop, store, machine shop, blacksmiths shop and a wagon shop. A wide variety of engineering products were manufactured at the new works for customers both in New South Wales and interstate and a new product line, rubber machinery was introduced. Examples of the Company's work at that times are:-

- 66 ft span bridges for NSW Government Railway.
- Structural parts for Newcastle Gas Co's plant.
- 40 ton Billet Shears for BHP.
- Structural parts for the Sydney Railway station.

However, products for coal handling and coal transportation in the Hunter Valley collieries were still a major part of A Goninan & Co Limited's business.

An interesting manifestation of 'Alfred Goninans entrepreneurial and engineering confidence is the setting up of Goninan Bridge Corporation Limited in 1924.'⁸ This consortium headed by Goninan was established to quote the Sydney Harbour Bridge. 'Goninans quote for a cantilever suspension bridge however was lost to Dorman Long & Co, who won the order with a \$4.2 million arch bridge.'⁹

Nine years after A Goninan & Co Limited became a private

6. Ibid
7. Ibid
8. Ibid
9. Ibid

enterprise, the first tentative steps were taken towards an association with Howard Smith. " The then owners of Caledonian Collieries in Newcastle offered, in 1914, to buy 10,000 Goninan shares. The offer was declined, but Howard Smith seeing the potential benefits in an involvement with a reputable engineering manufacturer came back in 1917 with another offer. This time they were able to acquire 18,750 shares in A Goninan & Co Limited. The election in 1929 of H B Howard Smith, as a director of A Goninan & Co Limited, was another significant move towards their participation in the management of Goninans."¹⁰

The first major management change came with the resignation of Alfred Goninan in 1933 after thirty four years as a company leader. His brother Ralph took over as a General Manager of the Company. "In 1938 A Goninan & Co Limited became listed on the stock exchange."¹¹ In 1946 Ralph Goninan was in turn succeeded by his son, Ralph Junior, who managed Goninans until his retirement in 1968. Ralph Jr, stayed on the Board of Directors of A Goninan & Co Limited, Engineers & Colliery Supplies Co Limited and Commonwealth Steel Co Limited until his death in 1972. "Howard Smith's participation on the board of Goninans continued from 1929 onwards and through to their acquisition of Goninan's as a subsidiary in 1964."¹²

After the Second World War, a period of rapid growth and high profitability followed. The original emphasis on jobbing work began to give way for a project orientated policy and the company acquired many licences for the manufacture of products of leading international designs. "In the early fifties Goninans commenced the manufacture of locomotives."¹³ During this time the Company's production of rolling stock increased considerably. The sixties brought with it a major involvement in the sugar industry. Sugar mills of Goninan design and manufacture are now among the worlds largest. During this decade Goninans manufacture of mineral grinding mills made headway and the Company also participated in the modernisation of Newcastle harbours coal loading facilities. In 1967 the Company designed and built a modern coal shiploader in the harbour basin, the first of its kind in Newcastle. In the seventies several major developments gave the Company a new competitive edge. To

10. Ibid

11. Ibid

12. Ibid

13. Phamplet on Railway Technology and Products Division

Goninan's traditional coal handling products, were now added new sophisticated equipment for the extraction of coal and ore. Most important however was Goninans branching out into the manufacture of passenger rail cars, making the Company a leader in the field.

Continual upgrading of the Broadmeadow plant accompanied the development of Goninans production. A large gear planner was installed in 1973, enabling Goninans to be recognised with top international manufacturers. Meanwhile Goninans production and design engineering capabilities advanced considerably with the introduction of more highly skilled personnel into the Company and the advent on the market of dramatically improved computer aided design facilities. The Company installed its computer aided design and draughting system in 1981.

The emphasis on specialised engineering will grow even stronger in the decade ahead, as Goninans looks towards a diversification into higher technology-based industrial equipment. This will be a particularly challenging task for Goninans, demanding continuous monitoring of new technological advances and new industrial processes. The Company's traditional engineering and manufacturing activities are already entering this new phase. At present Goninan is developing its expertise in problem analysis and new process design application, providing their clients with customised solution packages, which incorporate the best and latest in technological innovation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Goninans minutes from meetings 1901-1989
Pamphlets- Engineers to Australia-Goninan
Pamphlets- Railway Technology and Products Division
Pamphlets- Precision Gearing for Heavy Industry
Pamphlets- Goninan Manufacturing and General Engineers

A6963 (v)

UNIVERSITY OF NEWCASTLE

OPEN FOUNDATION COURSE

198

I, ROBERT BURNS give my

permission to ~~LYNNE BONSER~~

to use this interview, or part of this interview, for research, publication and/or broadcasting (delete one of these if required) and for copies to be lodged in the NEWCASTLE UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES

.....
for the use of other bona fide researchers.

Signed R Burns

Date 5 - 9 - 89

Interviewer LYNNE BONSER

OPEN FOUNDATION

ORAL HISTORY ASSIGNMENT

SUMMARY

INTERVIEWER: LYNNE BONSER

INTERVIEWEE: MR ROBERT BURNS
ADDRESS: 17 PHILIP PL,
CHARLESTOWN NSW 2290

SUBJECT OF INTERVIEW: A GONINAN & CO LIMITED

DATE OF INTERVIEW: 9th AUGUST 1989

PLACE OF INTERVIEW: 17 PHILIP PL, CHARLESTOWN NSW 2290

?

This interview is of Mr Robert Burns of 17 Philipi Place,
Charlestown NSW, it was recorded on the 9th of August 1989
by Lynne Bonser.

Mr Burns has been an employee of A Goninan & Co since 1949
until his recent retirement. Bob began work as a junior
clerk, and with promotions was eventually to become the
Personnel Manager ~~Manager~~ Superintendent.

Goninans , in 1949, employed a staff of about five hundred
people; today, that figure is similar, but in years gone by
it has been up around the eight hundred mark. Goninans
offer a large variety of apprenticeships and people who
have served their time with Goninans have a very good
reputation.

Goninans began as a small firm, started by Alfred Goninan
in 1899 and has grown to be a large engineering firm with
some of the most up-to-date technology available.

Goninans was taken over by the Howard Smith Group in 1960,
but still trades under the Goninan name. Bob feels that
had Howard Smith not taken over the Comapny it would no longer
be in existence. When at first Goninans was taken over the
employees were very downhearted, as they could see that
without a family Company it would no longer be a family
employer, but as most had to later admit Goninans would
probably not exist today if it was not taken over. With
the large financial backing by the Howard Smith Group they
were able to diversify into different fields of engineering.

In the early seventies Goninans began manufacturing passenger
trains. This has been a big boost to Goninans and also to
other Newcastle industries who supply the components Goninan
use for the manufacture of the passenger trains.

Goninans today is a highly recognised enginnering firm, not
only in Australia but also world wide, often supplying requisites
to overseas buyers.

This is Lynne Bonser interviewing Mr Bob Burns, of the Newcastle suburb of Charlestown, on his experience of working for A Goninan & Co. Limited.

Lynne: Now Bob have you lived in the Newcastle district all of your life ?

Bob: Yes, I have, I came to Newcastle as a baby, but I lived approximately forty years in Mayfield.

Lynne: Oh, right

Bob: I shifted out to Charlestown here, in I think it was about 1976.

Lynne: Oh, you haven't been here that long then.

Bob: No, thirteen years- approximately thirteen years. I saw it changing over their with pollution and just the environment.

Lynne: Yes , it has become very industrialised.

Lynne: Alright now, when did you start working at Goninan's ?

Bob: October, 1949

Lynne: And how old were you then?

Bob: I would have been about sixteen I'd say.

Lynne: And what did you start working as?

Bob: As a junior clerk in the - it was personnel when I commenced their, it was-only the office was half the size it is now, it may have even been smaller then that. But when I commenced their we were all up in what now is the foyer. It was the general office which had all the accounts, paymaster and that in that section and that's where I started. I was only their about four of five months and they did extend. They put their first extension on to the office as it was. They found they were running short of room and they extended down their, and that's when I went down to the new area, and that's the area I've been for the whole forty years, just on forty years in that section down their.

Lynne: But you did get promoted?

Bob: Oh, yes, I came up over a period, got out of a junior clerk to become a clerk in personnel, handling payroll and dealing with people, plant, office and employment terminating and come what may.

Lynne: Some aspects were not that pleasant.

Bob: No, it wasn't. But then I was promoted back , a chap passed away, actually the industrial officer at the time, he had retired about 1971, I think it was, I think he got out about 1971/72 with ill health reasons. There was about five of us in the personnel office, that is all there was their, was about five handling personnel. We had worked together for quite a number of years and we were a

pretty good team, but he left then because of ill health, he was around about the sixty mark. There was another chap who was more or less the pay master, I don't know whether he was classified in that area, but he was the pay master. He also went through a serious illness, he gave it away just about eighteen months after the industrial officer retired, and I am sorry to say they both passed away within a week of each other in 1974. Now George Macabe, who became the personnel manager in later years, he more or less took over the industrial offices role, you know, in charge of the office and I more or less was assisting him. Then this other chap died from this illness, which was leukemia, and from there on we more or less kept working together in those positions, you know. I became pay master in that position their, and later on over the last nine or ten years, I suppose I became the personnel superintendent, which is the position I held when I finished, round about that period anyway.

Lynne: And how many employees were there then when you started in 1949 ?

Bob: Well, as a rough guess I would say around the five hundred mark, it varied, it has gone up in the good times and I would say around about the 1980's I think we got up to about seven hundred and forty six, the most that was ever employed at Goninan's over their, in numbers. You know we had a lot of work, there was a lot of work and then the recession more or less came into it, and it never really, I don't think that Newcastle has ever really got back on top ever since them.

Lynne: So how many would be their today ?

Bob: When I finished their, the other day, there was about five hundred, I was down to, I think now back to about five hundred. It has not varied, you know, because of the restructuring and problems which the Company is going through, you know they just cannot compete on doing small machining work and they are gradually closing that section down. That has dropped the numbers of people their. I have seen times their when I could not get people for love nor money, I just could not get people, hire people, you could not get tradesmen.

Lynne: What years were they?

Bob; Well that's gone on and on at different times you know, it is just the way the times, how the times were, the economy, and just what had taken place, but I was near out the front their trying to

drag them in.

Lynne: Picking anyone up off the street? (laughing)

Bob: Well, that is how bad it was, that you could not get people and then, in fact there was, I am not sure of the dates, but they even upgraded the, there was a push to put on more apprentices and when the Newcastle dockyard, originally looked like there was a lot of problems their and they were reducing their workforce we took a lot of their apprentices, so that they could complete their time. But that was the original before the dockyard in the longrun closed altogether but a few years before they had problems their.

Lynne: And what sort of apprenticeships did Goninan's offer?

Bob: Mostly fitting and machining, fitting machining and boiler making, these were their main. There was moulders when there was a foundry but the foundry has been closed, there was electrical but fitting and machining and boiler making, they are the two main sides of it.

Lynne: And how many apprentices would they have today?

Bob: I could be out, but it is only about seventy or eighty I suppose somewhere around about that mark I think, then there is about sixteen or seventeen trainees still their.

Lynne: But it is a big employer for the Newcastle area isn't it ?

Bob: It to me has been one, going through all the years that I have worked their, it has been one of the most outstanding employer's in Newcastle. I look at it this way:- today I have seen that many Companies close, there are small Companies and there are large Companies, and if they have not closed they have shed their workforce in half. You know you look at the Companies over the period, and to me Goninan's have been a very fortunate Company to be able to exist as they have.

Lynne: It has existed through wars and depressions!

Bob: I stated this to my employees, you know, that we have all been very fortunate to be able to have the service that we have been able to get out of the Company.

Lynne: Yes, were Goninans good to work for though?

Bob: Yes. Well my group, I could not speak more highly of the company. It has changed, I have had my gripes and been very down hearted at some of the things that I have seen, and upsetting times but it has been a very good company to the employees as I see it. I found it more then anything, that over the years when I have seen places :- O.K. well we have seen ^{Coolhauld's} Caldells close at it was, it is now Tomago Aluminium, but it was around about two thousand

people and with the dockyards gone, Alice Chalmers reduced their workforce dramatically to what they used to have. These places have changed dramatically and dropped their workforce. BHP has gone from eleven odd thousand down to about five and a half thousand people in this area.

Lynne: Goninans has stood up well hasn't it?

Bob: We have had our ups and downs at different times. I have seen these other companies dropping off people like steam, while we were fortunate to have work at the time, and if we did retrench we mainly retrenched in the boiler making or fitting area. Thirty or ~~fourty~~ people probably at the most at one time. At times we had such a downturn that we just could not wear it. One of the biggest assets of Goninans was, and they used to pride themselves on this, was that of their training of apprentices. We have training centres and the apprentices that have been trained at Goninans could go anywhere to any other company and perform.

Lynne: They find it easy to get a job.

Bob: That is right, their training and experience in different types of work, whether it be fitting and machining or fitting work, they could go anywhere and work and get a job. I had to pick and choose of the people that we took over ~~their~~, we would interview people and send them down to the area that we were looking for- a certain type of tradesman- and they would say, I am sorry but I have never done that sort of work. They have come from another industry, it may have been BHP, but they have not specialised in that type of work, where as Goninans were specialists. That has been one of their high ratings as far as training of apprentices. There was one black spot, which always hurt, and it did not go down well with the company, that they had to do it in the later years, and that was retrenching some of the boys as they were coming out of their time. Good boys but we just never had the work, we were just managing to hold onto the workforce that we had, but just could not afford to take on another ten or fifteen fitting and machinist's or a similar number of boiler makers. The work just was not ~~their~~, so we had to let them go when they came out of their time.

Lynne: But, they would not have trouble finding employment?

Bob: No, most of them did alright, but that is where that side of it was.

Lynne: When you first started working their, Ralph Goninan Jr, was your employer!

Bob: Ralph Goninan Jr, was the General Manager with Frank Butcher as the Company Secretary, Les Hands as the Works Manager and Bill Eddie, who later became the General Manager, was the assistant Works Manager. They were the four most important people at the time when I started. The Industrial Officer, as the position was then, was my boss, he had been ~~their~~ for many years. That position would probably rate close to the accountant. Les Street, was the accountant their and they were more or less on a par as far as their positions go, but other than that there was a purchasing officer, Reg Hand, he was Les Hand's brother. These were some of the top people, but there would have only been seven or eight top staff people at the time.

Lynne: Did you find Ralph good to work for?

Bob: Yes, he was a hard man and he was very boisterous type of man, he would soon let you know if he did not agree with something and the language would flow rather strongly at certain times if things did not go right. But generally we were pretty well run. As far as the shareholders go, you had to keep them happy. One of the major shareholders of that time was Howard Smith's.

Lynne: This was in 1949?

Bob: I do not know how long they had the majority of the shares.

Lynne: But they took it over in 1960 didn't they?

Bob: Gradually in 1960, that is right, they took it over fully and they have had it ever since.

Lynne: Was there changes when they took it over?

Bob: Well it was more or less a family company when Ralph Goninan was alive, what I would notice on the plant was that you had grandfathers, fathers, grandsons, it was a real family company. When someone worked ~~their~~ they expected his son to work their and then his son to work their, and this was the way the company was for many years, it was a real family concern. I think in one family there must have been three or four generations working their. If I can remember the names were Gallimore's.

Lynne: You would not find that these days anywhere would you?

Bob: That is what it was, but when Howard Smith took it over completely, I think we were all very sorry. We could see all that personal basis that the company had had for years, would go out the gate.

That feeling of being a real family type company. And I think ninety percent of people their, or more, all thought along the same line. But it has taken over and thing change .

Lynne: It was not the family group anymore but a large company?

Bob: Yes, but as I found out later on, and I would be one of the critics of it happening and I am afraid I had to eat my words in later years, because today if it had not have happened, a takeover by Howard Smith, I do not think Goninans would have been their as Goninans, as the company it was.

Lynne: Why?

Bob: I think that they would have just gone out of business for the support of the Howard Smith Group behind it financially being able to diversify in different ways, as far as new technology goes and rolling stock and going into new areas that they had never ever been into before Howard Smith took over. Without their financial support the company would not have existed, and that is a pretty well known fact. I would say they would not have existed as Goninans, it would have been like a lot of other industries and have been sold off.

Lynne: Ralph Goninan Jr stayed on the board until his death didn't he in 1978?

Bob: Yes, around about , I forget the date of his death.

Lynne: Did he still have a lot to do with the running of the Company?

Bob: No, not after his health started affecting him, but there have been a few Company Secretaries to since then. They were very good too, Frank Butcher was a very strong Company Secretary, very knowledgable.

Lynne: To work at Goninans did people have to belong to the unions?

Bob: Yes, as you will find in most big industries that you have to be a union member otherwise you will not get a start. The union just would not let you start on the plant or you know the office part of it. That was accepted later by management that any clerk starting would be requested to join the union.

Lynne: Over the years have you had a lot of industrial action?

Bob: Well yes, it varied over the years. I have seen a lot of it some of it was a terrible situation, over some ridiculous issues, especially in years gone by it was for some considerable time. You would get a running until a few years ago the company got together with the unions. We had to be able to survive and get together and put together an agreement.

Lynne: And with the workers?

Bob: Between the management and the employees, so that we could get rid of all this union strife, and on the whole it has been pretty good.

Lynne: Since then?

Bob: Since then, but you do get times that they break away from it, as far as sticking to the agreement, but then it may be general throughout the region when there is a wage demand coming on or something like this has taken place, and someones not happy with it. This may bring a bit of pressure to bear again and could cause trouble their and then.

Lynne: What sort of an agreement was it?

Bob: An agreement between the company and the different unions. Just an agreement for different reasons. Trying to stop strikes in any shape, you know, lets talk first, but there was a disciplinary code, and these had to be put into place because you can get a strike if you dismiss someone for doing something. This is the first thing ban, you know they would not accept that straight unless it was something very serious. And we have a policy on certain procedures and we had to say both sides would obey what this procedure was in the disciplinary action. This was the type of thing that had to take place, but that was only one part of it. On the whole they have had a pretty good run since we got these agreements in, but as I said from time to time it blows out.

Lynne: And starts up again?

Bob: Yes start up again until you get together again.

Lynne: Bob, in the seventies Goninans started manufacturing the passenger trains, did that create a lot of employment?

Bob: Well this was always something that is stated by the Governments, a statement will be made in the media that five hundred jobs and one thousand jobs will be created with such a vast contract, and I have no doubt that it does take place, but it is not necessarily at the place that manufacturing is being done, which is Goninans. I used to smile time and time again when this comment was made over the wireless or television or in the paper about how many jobs it was going to make. I would find I was inundated with people looking for work then at Goninans. It may have been only one or two days after the announcement, but it was not and it did not necessarily mean that Goninans would have all these jobs on offer.

It helped us to maintain the work force we had and we might put a few technical people on who you needed for the type of work that had to be done. We even may have had to get a few more tradesmen, but on the whole it did not mean a lot to Goninans in numbers of people, but as far as suppliers of material and all this type of thing....

Lynne: Created the work in that area.

Bob: Yes, that was where it would create work. It is the same as when this latest contract, the biggest contract Goninans ever got was this Tangara train, well that has created work all over Newcastle and other areas too but not necessarily Goninans. We did put some new people on as far as the technology side goes, but on the whole our workforce did not expand dramatically because of the new Tangara trains. It did mean a continuity of work for the people we had.

Lynne: When Alfred Goninan started the Company he had the dream that Goninans would always keep ahead of its competitors. Do you think it is still like that today?

Bob: Yes, today I would say we are possibly, with changes especially with changes in rolling stock, that we are now one of the biggest Companies in the rolling stock area in Australia or very close to it the way things are. We have also taken over another Company known as Goninan W.A. in Western Australia. They are rebuilding, they started building locomotives over their originally and they now have won further contracts for their rolling stock, which is currently being built over their now. They are part of the Goninan Group and we have also got another Company which comes under the Goninan wing, and it is is Taree N.S.W, it is known as Lansdowne Engineering, which we took over some years ago, back when we got that original contract for the carriages. It was bought when we needed an area to build all the bogies. They are going quite well and now they are building the bogies for the Tangara, but they are also doing other work too on a lighter side of what Goninans build themselves here. Goninans have got other areas - there is Tulk Goninan at Sandgate and there is another one at MacKay, it is also part of the Goninan Group.

Lynne: And what do they specialise in ?

Bob: Electrical, on the electrical side of it, but all these Companies are doing quite well I understand.

Lynne: Now Bob you retired a few weeks ago - have you got any specific dreams for Goninans that you would like to see come true?

Bob: For Goninans?

Lynne: Yes, anything you would like to see them do?

Bob: There are hard times ahead, as there are in a lot of Companies I have seen in Newcastle. I thought that Newcastle had picked up, for the first time in the last eighteen months, it looked the best it has for some considerable time, as far as manufacturing work, but to me it looks again as if it is slackening. If they get the frigate contract that will be a major push, it will help rebuild Newcastle. But there are a lot of Companies going through a few hard times again and Goninans is one that has a lot ahead of it to get back. I have no doubt that they will but Companies wherever they are they have all got to change their operations and look far afield for new types of ventures. Goninans are doing this, they have a lot of irons in the fire in regards to rolling stock and defence work and if they can win some of them it will be a major boost to Newcastle and to Goninans.

Lynne: Well Bob I would like to thank you for this interview and wish you well in your retirement.

Bob: Thankyou.

A6963 (v)

UNIVERSITY OF NEWCASTLE

OPEN FOUNDATION COURSE

198

I, ROBERT BURNS give my

permission to LYNNE BONSER

to use this interview, or part of this interview, for research, publication and/or broadcasting (delete one of these if required) and for copies to be lodged in the NEWCASTLE UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES

.....
for the use of other bona fide researchers.

Signed R Burns

Date 5 - 9 - 89

Interviewer LYNNE BONSER

OPEN FOUNDATION

ORAL HISTORY ASSIGNMENT

SUMMARY

INTERVIEWER: LYNNE BONSER

INTERVIEWEE: MR ROBERT BURNS
ADDRESS: 17 PHILIP PL,
CHARLESTOWN NSW 2290

SUBJECT OF INTERVIEW: A GONINAN & CO LIMITED

DATE OF INTERVIEW: 9th AUGUST 1989

PLACE OF INTERVIEW: 17 PHILIP PL, CHARLESTOWN NSW 2290

?

This interview is of Mr Robert Burns of 17 Philipi Place,
Charlestown NSW, it was recorded on the 9th of August 1989
by Lynne Bonser.

Mr Burns has been an employee of A Goninan & Co since 1949
until his recent retirement. Bob began work as a junior
clerk, and with promotions was eventually to become the
Personnel Manager ~~Manager~~ Superintendent.

Goninans , in 1949, employed a staff of about five hundred
people; today, that figure is similar, but in years gone by
it has been up around the eight hundred mark. Goninans
offer a large variety of apprenticeships and people who
have served their time with Goninans have a very good
reputation.

Goninans began as a small firm, started by Alfred Goninan
in 1899 and has grown to be a large engineering firm with
some of the most up-to-date technology available.

Goninans was taken over by the Howard Smith Group in 1960,
but still trades under the Goninan name. Bob feels that
had Howard Smith not taken over the Comapny it would no longer
be in existence. When at first Goninans was taken over the
employees were very downhearted, as they could see that
without a family Company it would no longer be a family
employer, but as most had to later admit Goninans would
probably not exist today if it was not taken over. With
the large financial backing by the Howard Smith Group they
were able to diversify into different fields of engineering.

In the early seventies Goninans began manufacturing passenger
trains. This has been a big boost to Goninans and also to
other Newcastle industries who supply the components Goninan
use for the manufacture of the passenger trains.

Goninans today is a highly recognised enginnering firm, not
only in Australia but also world wide, often supplying requisites
to overseas buyers.

This is Lynne Bonser interviewing Mr Bob Burns, of the Newcastle suburb of Charlestown, on his experience of working for A Goninan & Co. Limited.

Lynne: Now Bob have you lived in the Newcastle district all of your life ?

Bob: Yes, I have, I came to Newcastle as a baby, but I lived approximately forty years in Mayfield.

Lynne: Oh, right

Bob: I shifted out to Charlestown here, in I think it was about 1976.

Lynne: Oh, you haven't been here that long then.

Bob: No, thirteen years- approximately thirteen years. I saw it changing over their with pollution and just the environment.

Lynne: Yes , it has become very industrialised.

Lynne: Alright now, when did you start working at Goninan's ?

Bob: October, 1949

Lynne: And how old were you then?

Bob: I would have been about sixteen I'd say.

Lynne: And what did you start working as?

Bob: As a junior clerk in the - it was personnel when I commenced their, it was-only the office was half the size it is now, it may have even been smaller then that. But when I commenced their we were all up in what now is the foyer. It was the general office which had all the accounts, paymaster and that in that section and that's where I started. I was only their about four of five months and they did extend. They put their first extension on to the office as it was. They found they were running short of room and they extended down their, and that's when I went down to the new area, and that's the area I've been for the whole forty years, just on forty years in that section down their.

Lynne: But you did get promoted?

Bob: Oh, yes, I came up over a period, got out of a junior clerk to become a clerk in personnel, handling payroll and dealing with people, plant, office and employment terminating and come what may.

Lynne: Some aspects were not that pleasant.

Bob: No, it wasn't. But then I was promoted back , a chap passed away, actually the industrial officer at the time, he had retired about 1971, I think it was, I think he got out about 1971/72 with ill health reasons. There was about five of us in the personnel office, that is all there was their, was about five handling personnel. We had worked together for quite a number of years and we were a

pretty good team, but he left then because of ill health, he was around about the sixty mark. There was another chap who was more or less the pay master, I don't know whether he was classified in that area, but he was the pay master. He also went through a serious illness, he gave it away just about eighteen months after the industrial officer retired, and I am sorry to say they both passed away within a week of each other in 1974. Now George Macabe, who became the personnel manager in later years, he more or less took over the industrial offices role, you know, in charge of the office and I more or less was assisting him. Then this other chap died from this illness, which was leukemia, and from there on we more or less kept working together in those positions, you know. I became pay master in that position their, and later on over the last nine or ten years, I suppose I became the personnel superintendent, which is the position I held when I finished, round about that period anyway.

Lynne: And how many employees were there then when you started in 1949 ?

Bob: Well, as a rough guess I would say around the five hundred mark, it varied, it has gone up in the good times and I would say around about the 1980's I think we got up to about seven hundred and forty six, the most that was ever employed at Goninan's over their, in numbers. You know we had a lot of work, there was a lot of work and then the recession more or less came into it, and it never really, I don't think that Newcastle has ever really got back on top ever since them.

Lynne: So how many would be their today ?

Bob: When I finished their, the other day, there was about five hundred, I was down to, I think now back to about five hundred. It has not varied, you know, because of the restructuring and problems which the Company is going through, you know they just cannot compete on doing small machining work and they are gradually closing that section down. That has dropped the numbers of people their. I have seen times their when I could not get people for love nor money, I just could not get people, hire people, you could not get tradesmen.

Lynne: What years were they?

Bob; Well that's gone on and on at different times you know, it is just the way the times, how the times were, the economy, and just what had taken place, but I was near out the front their trying to

drag them in.

Lynne: Picking anyone up off the street? (laughing)

Bob: Well, that is how bad it was, that you could not get people and then, in fact there was, I am not sure of the dates, but they even upgraded the, there was a push to put on more apprentices and when the Newcastle dockyard, originally looked like there was a lot of problems their and they were reducing their workforce we took a lot of their apprentices, so that they could complete their time. But that was the original before the dockyard in the longrun closed altogether but a few years before they had problems their.

Lynne: And what sort of apprenticeships did Goninan's offer?

Bob: Mostly fitting and machining, fitting machining and boiler making, these were their main. There was moulders when there was a foundry but the foundry has been closed, there was electrical but fitting and machining and boiler making, they are the two main sides of it.

Lynne: And how many apprentices would they have today?

Bob: I could be out, but it is only about seventy or eighty I suppose somewhere around about that mark I think, then there is about sixteen or seventeen trainees still their.

Lynne: But it is a big employer for the Newcastle area isn't it ?

Bob: It to me has been one, going through all the years that I have worked their, it has been one of the most outstanding employer's in Newcastle. I look at it this way:- today I have seen that many Companies close, there are small Companies and there are large Companies, and if they have not closed they have shed their workforce in half. You know you look at the Companies over the period, and to me Goninan's have been a very fortunate Company to be able to exist as they have.

Lynne: It has existed through wars and depressions!

Bob: I stated this to my employees, you know, that we have all been very fortunate to be able to have the service that we have been able to get out of the Company.

Lynne: Yes, were Goninans good to work for though?

Bob: Yes. Well my group, I could not speak more highly of the company. It has changed, I have had my gripes and been very down hearted at some of the things that I have seen, and upsetting times but it has been a very good company to the employees as I see it. I found it more then anything, that over the years when I have seen places :- O.K. well we have seen ^{Coat Hauls} Caldells close at it was, it is now Tomago Aluminium, but it was around about two thousand

people and with the dockyards gone, Alice Chalmers reduced their workforce dramatically to what they used to have. These places have changed dramatically and dropped their workforce. BHP has gone from eleven odd thousand down to about five and a half thousand people in this area.

Lynne: Goninans has stood up well hasn't it?

Bob: We have had our ups and downs at different times. I have seen these other companies dropping off people like steam, while we were fortunate to have work at the time, and if we did retrench we mainly retrenched in the boiler making or fitting area. Thirty or ~~fourty~~ people probably at the most at one time. At times we had such a downturn that we just could not wear it. One of the biggest assets of Goninans was, and they used to pride themselves on this, was that of their training of apprentices. We have training centres and the apprentices that have been trained at Goninans could go anywhere to any other company and perform.

Lynne: They find it easy to get a job.

Bob: That is right, their training and experience in different types of work, whether it be fitting and machining or fitting work, they could go anywhere and work and get a job. I had to pick and choose of the people that we took over ~~their~~, we would interview people and send them down to the area that we were looking for- a certain type of tradesman- and they would say, I am sorry but I have never done that sort of work. They have come from another industry, it may have been BHP, but they have not specialised in that type of work, where as Goninans were specialists. That has been one of their high ratings as far as training of apprentices. There was one black spot, which always hurt, and it did not go down well with the company, that they had to do it in the later years, and that was retrenching some of the boys as they were coming out of their time. Good boys but we just never had the work, we were just managing to hold onto the workforce that we had, but just could not afford to take on another ten or fifteen fitting and machinist's or a similar number of boiler makers. The work just was not ~~their~~, so we had to let them go when they came out of their time.

Lynne: But, they would not have trouble finding employment?

Bob: No, most of them did alright, but that is where that side of it was.

Lynne: When you first started working their, Ralph Goninan Jr, was your employer!

Bob: Ralph Goninan Jr, was the General Manager with Frank Butcher as the Company Secretary, Les Hands as the Works Manager and Bill Eddie, who later became the General Manager, was the assistant Works Manager. They were the four most important people at the time when I started. The Industrial Officer, as the position was then, was my boss, he had been ~~their~~ for many years. That position would probably rate close to the accountant. Les Street, was the accountant their and they were more or less on a par as far as their positions go, but other than that there was a purchasing officer, Reg Hand, he was Les Hand's brother. These were some of the top people, but there would have only been seven or eight top staff people at the time.

Lynne: Did you find Ralph good to work for?

Bob: Yes, he was a hard man and he was very boisterous type of man, he would soon let you know if he did not agree with something and the language would flow rather strongly at certain times if things did not go right. But generally we were pretty well run. As far as the shareholders go, you had to keep them happy. One of the major shareholders of that time was Howard Smith's.

Lynne: This was in 1949?

Bob: I do not know how long they had the majority of the shares.

Lynne: But they took it over in 1960 didn't they?

Bob: Gradually in 1960, that is right, they took it over fully and they have had it ever since.

Lynne: Was there changes when they took it over?

Bob: Well it was more or less a family company when Ralph Goninan was alive, what I would notice on the plant was that you had grandfathers, fathers, grandsons, it was a real family company. When someone worked ~~their~~ they expected his son to work their and then his son to work their, and this was the way the company was for many years, it was a real family concern. I think in one family there must have been three or four generations working their. If I can remember the names were Gallimore's.

Lynne: You would not find that these days anywhere would you?

Bob: That is what it was, but when Howard Smith took it over completely, I think we were all very sorry. We could see all that personal basis that the company had had for years, would go out the gate.

That feeling of being a real family type company. And I think ninety percent of people their, or more, all thought along the same line. But it has taken over and thing change .

Lynne: It was not the family group anymore but a large company?

Bob: Yes, but as I found out later on, and I would be one of the critics of it happening and I am afraid I had to eat my words in later years, because today if it had not have happened, a takeover by Howard Smith, I do not think Goninans would have been their as Goninans, as the company it was.

Lynne: Why?

Bob: I think that they would have just gone out of business for the support of the Howard Smith Group behind it financially being able to diversify in different ways, as far as new technology goes and rolling stock and going into new areas that they had never ever been into before Howard Smith took over. Without their financial support the company would not have existed, and that is a pretty well known fact. I would say they would not have existed as Goninans, it would have been like a lot of other industries and have been sold off.

Lynne: Ralph Goninan Jr stayed on the board until his death didn't he in 1978?

Bob: Yes, around about , I forget the date of his death.

Lynne: Did he still have a lot to do with the running of the Company?

Bob: No, not after his health started affecting him, but there have been a few Company Secretaries to since then. They were very good too, Frank Butcher was a very strong Company Secretary, very knowledgable.

Lynne: To work at Goninans did people have to belong to the unions?

Bob: Yes, as you will find in most big industries that you have to be a union member otherwise you will not get a start. The union just would not let you start on the plant or you know the office part of it. That was accepted later by management that any clerk starting would be requested to join the union.

Lynne: Over the years have you had a lot of industrial action?

Bob: Well yes, it varied over the years. I have seen a lot of it some of it was a terrible situation, over some ridiculous issues, especially in years gone by it was for some considerable time. You would get a running until a few years ago the company got together with the unions. We had to be able to survive and get together and put together an agreement.

Lynne: And with the workers?

Bob: Between the management and the employees, so that we could get rid of all this union strife, and on the whole it has been pretty good.

Lynne: Since then?

Bob: Since then, but you do get times that they break away from it, as far as sticking to the agreement, but then it may be general throughout the region when there is a wage demand coming on or something like this has taken place, and someones not happy with it. This may bring a bit of pressure to bear again and could cause trouble their and then.

Lynne: What sort of an agreement was it?

Bob: An agreement between the company and the different unions. Just an agreement for different reasons. Trying to stop strikes in any shape, you know, lets talk first, but there was a disciplinary code, and these had to be put into place because you can get a strike if you dismiss someone for doing something. This is the first thing ban, you know they would not accept that straight unless it was something very serious. And we have a policy on certain procedures and we had to say both sides would obey what this procedure was in the disciplinary action. This was the type of thing that had to take place, but that was only one part of it. On the whole they have had a pretty good run since we got these agreements in, but as I said from time to time it blows out.

Lynne: And starts up again?

Bob: Yes start up again until you get together again.

Lynne: Bob, in the seventies Goninans started manufacturing the passenger trains, did that create a lot of employment?

Bob: Well this was always something that is stated by the Governments, a statement will be made in the media that five hundred jobs and one thousand jobs will be created with such a vast contract, and I have no doubt that it does take place, but it is not necessarily at the place that manufacturing is being done, which is Goninans. I used to smile time and time again when this comment was made over the wireless or television or in the paper about how many jobs it was going to make. I would find I was inundated with people looking for work then at Goninans. It may have been only one or two days after the announcement, but it was not and it did not necessarily mean that Goninans would have all these jobs on offer.

It helped us to maintain the work force we had and we might put a few technical people on who you needed for the type of work that had to be done. We even may have had to get a few more tradesmen, but on the whole it did not mean a lot to Goninans in numbers of people, but as far as suppliers of material and all this type of thing....

Lynne: Created the work in that area.

Bob: Yes, that was where it would create work. It is the same as when this latest contract, the biggest contract Goninans ever got was this Tangara train, well that has created work all over Newcastle and other areas too but not necessarily Goninans. We did put some new people on as far as the technology side goes, but on the whole our workforce did not expand dramatically because of the new Tangara trains. It did mean a continuity of work for the people we had.

Lynne: When Alfred Goninan started the Company he had the dream that Goninans would always keep ahead of its competitors. Do you think it is still like that today?

Bob: Yes, today I would say we are possibly, with changes especially with changes in rolling stock, that we are now one of the biggest Companies in the rolling stock area in Australia or very close to it the way things are. We have also taken over another Company known as Goninan W.A. in Western Australia. They are rebuilding, they started building locomotives over their originally and they now have won further contracts for their rolling stock, which is currently being built over their now. They are part of the Goninan Group and we have also got another Company which comes under the Goninan wing, and it is is Taree N.S.W, it is known as Lansdowne Engineering, which we took over some years ago, back when we got that original contract for the carriages. It was bought when we needed an area to build all the bogies. They are going quite well and now they are building the bogies for the Tangara, but they are also doing other work too on a lighter side of what Goninans build themselves here. Goninans have got other areas - there is Tulk Goninan at Sandgate and there is another one at MacKay, it is also part of the Goninan Group.

Lynne: And what do they specialise in ?

Bob: Electrical, on the electrical side of it, but all these Companies are doing quite well I understand.

Lynne: Now Bob you retired a few weeks ago - have you got any specific dreams for Goninans that you would like to see come true?

Bob: For Goninans?

Lynne: Yes, anything you would like to see them do?

Bob: There are hard times ahead, as there are in a lot of Companies I have seen in Newcastle. I thought that Newcastle had picked up, for the first time in the last eighteen months, it looked the best it has for some considerable time, as far as manufacturing work, but to me it looks again as if it is slackening. If they get the frigate contract that will be a major push, it will help rebuild Newcastle. But there are a lot of Companies going through a few hard times again and Goninans is one that has a lot ahead of it to get back. I have no doubt that they will but Companies wherever they are they have all got to change their operations and look far afield for new types of ventures. Goninans are doing this, they have a lot of irons in the fire in regards to rolling stock and defence work and if they can win some of them it will be a major boost to Newcastle and to Goninans.

Lynne: Well Bob I would like to thank you for this interview and wish you well in your retirement.

Bob: Thankyou.