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AUSTRALIAN HISTORY
TUTORIAL ESSAY
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JOHN SOBB'S LIFE IN RETAIL.

During his forty-six years in retail John Sobb has had to overcome many challenges. He has witnessed many changes in the retail industry. Sobb's Furniture was one of the last remaining family retail houses until they decided to close on the 30th June, 1984.

John Sobb was born in Marrickville on the 18th October, 1923. His father started the business originally in June of 1937, at 357 Hunter Street. John joined his father in 1938 along with his uncle Leo who came up from Sydney to help his brother in the business. During the post depression and pre second world war period, retail was a very personalised business. Sobb's Furniture displayed this personal touch by holding a family picnic at Speers Point Park in 1938. They also held a talent quest through radio station 2HD.

The second world war started a short time after this and life was very tough. John was at war for a period of three years (1942-1945). Leo also went to war from 1940-1946. John's father was left to struggle on in the business for this period. During the second world war there were no stocks available as the production of furniture was prohibited because they needed the materials for the munition factories. When John and his uncle returned from the war they rejoined John's father in the business. The problem of lack of stock lasted for a further ten years. It was a gradual thing that took a long time to rectify itself. The second world war was a big struggle for John Sobb and Sobb's Furniture.

There have been many changes in the retail industry since John Sobb started. In the late thirties "thousands of people would come down from Cessnock and Maitland, particularly Cessnock, Kurri Kurri and Neath." This is something that does not occur today, because of the growth of Cessnock and Maitland retail wise. This was just one evident change in retail that John witnessed.

Retail was very stagnant up until the sixties. The advent of discount houses was a major change in the 1960's. 1 "The first major one to hit Newcastle would have been Sydney Wide". 2 This brought a very different way of retailing to Newcastle. "The bigger retail companies were buying a whole lot better than the smaller retailers" 3 "This was unfair competition, "it was very hard to exist. 4 To try and compete with this unfair competition the Sobb's had to be very astute in their business.

This change is another example that confronted John Sobb in his life in retail.

To overcome this problem Sobb's Furniture had to join a buying group which was called "Furniture Trade Buyers Co-Op". 5) This meant that they could buy better and compete with the discount houses. The group consisted of one hundred privately owned stores. This type of buying still goes on today with groups such as Sportscene and Mensland in operation to help the small man compete with the big boys.

The emergence of shopping centres coinciding with the more frequent use of motor vehicles has changed retail. The public had means of transport to these shopping centres, and this dragged people away from the city centre and made it hard for people like John Sobb to survive. Due to this John's belief is that "if David Jones happened to close in the city, the rest of the city would be in big trouble". 6) as they are the drawcard.

Sobbs Furniture closed its doors on the 30th June, 1984. Many were sorry to see them go because they gave good personalised service. "People realise that it won't be long before personal service is a thing of the past". 7)

During John Sobb's forty-six year association with retail in Newcastle he endured many changes. He overcame these changes to run a very successful business in a very trying field.

FOOTNOTES

1. Transcript of Interview. P 1-3
2. Ibid p4
3. Ibid
4. Ibid
5. Ibid
6. Ibid
7. The Newcastle Herald Wednesday, April 25, 1984, p 1.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

The Newcastle Herald Wednesday, April 25, 1984.

SUMMARY.

John Sobb was born in Marrickville, Sydney on the 18.10.23. He spent most of his childhood in Marrickville. His father decided to move to Newcastle to start a furniture retail business in June of 1937. The shop then was situated at 357 Hunter Street. John Sobb's Uncle Leo came up from Sydney with his brother to help him. In 1938 Sobb's Furniture held two advertising, social events which were extremely popular. The first one was a public picnic at Speers Point Park and the second was a talent quest which was run in conjunction with 2HD Radio.

The war was a tragedy that the Sobb family had to overcome. Leo went to war from 1940 until 1946 and John went from 1942 until 1945. The war made it very tough for John's father to survive in business as they had extreme trouble getting stock. When Leo and John returned from war they had to help Mr. Sobb Snr. rebuild the business. They really came back from war to face another adversity. It took about ten years before stock levels returned to an acceptable level.

During his forty six years in retail John witnessed many changes. In the early days when train loads of people would flock down from the Coalfields to shop in Newcastle which doesn't happen now. The advent of the discount houses in the 1960's. ~~These houses~~ made it very hard to compete and the only way you could was to be very astute in your business. Also the large shopping centres made it hard for the little shops to survive.

Sobb's Furniture closed its doors on the 30th June, 1984. They were very appreciative of the people of Newcastle and had a very happy association with retail.

TRANSCRIPT

Were you born in New Lanbton?

No I was born in Marrickville, Sydney on the 18.10.23. I was schooled in Marrickville up to the age or up to the year 1937. When dad decided to come to Newcastle I completed a further six months schooling at Marist brothers.

Did you spend most of your childhood in Sydney?

Most of my childhood. Only the last six months of my schooldays were spent in Newcastle.

When you moved to Newcastle was that when your father decided to open the business?

My father decided to come to Newcastle and open the business which was at 357 Hunter Street and that was in June 1937. His brother came up and worked for him then. He started with him as an employee, his brother Leo and I finished school in February 1938. Dad wanted me to carry on and go to college but I didn't want to do that. I don't know what set me on the thought of retailing but all I wanted to do was get into the shop. In February 1938 he more or less said ok if you decide you are not going to college, well you can come in and give it a go and see how you go. So really thats what happened. So I started in 1939. Then his brother went into the army in early 1940, it would have been 40 or maybe late 40 perhaps. I went into the army in May 1942. The first twelve or eighteen months after the war had started stocks were reasonably plentiful. But within a further twelve months it was practically impossible to get any stocks. Alot of people were called up for different kinds of duties, into munition factories and so forth and alot of other people went into services. I was away form the period of may 1942 until October 1945. After I left the shop , stockwise things were very bad. dad moved across the road into a very small shop with one other fellow on the staff and just battled on with what ever stock they could get until the war finished. I came back in October 1945, my uncle Leo came back in January 1946. There was a property two doors away from where dad was operating from. It was a much larger shop which was 400 Hunter Street. That became available for sale and dad purchased that property after consulting Jack and myself as to whether we felt that we would give it a go and see how we went for stock because we didn't have and idea what the situation was going to be like.

After the war was over, did it make it very tough?

Very very hard for any retailer. It wasn't hard to sell anything it was hard to get the stock to sell. We decided yes okay, we would give it a go. we Didn't have any idea how we would go and we started there immediately after the war. It was just Jack, Leo I'm sorry he was called jack which is confusing because it make two Jacks. So Leo myself and my dad. we kicked off with the idea of just

seeing how we would operate wise and that would have depended[^] on how long we would of stayed there, really that virtuelly[^] what it amounted to.

What was Hunter Street, What did it look like then compared to now?

Hunter Street in those days one particular thing I can remember was, one week was considered steel works pay and the following week was the miner's pay and always on the miners pay day you could rest asure that there would be train loads of people that would come down from Cessnock and Maitland particulary Cessnock, Kurri and Neath, all those places. On every second Saturday morning hundreds or thousands of people would come down from the coalfiels to shop in Newcastle, that was very very noticable; that is something of course that you don't see today at all. that was a very noticable thing that every second Saturday morning, I can remember one train used to get in at the Civic Station about twenty past eight and you would see people getting of the train and straight into the shops every Saturday over the years that just died out with the growth of Maitland shopping and so forth and I guess Cessnock became larger shopping wise.

When you originally went, started off when you left school did you envisage to be in business?

As far as selling was concerned I loved it. I had no idea what the future held for me I was too young I guess to have even thought about that. Then the war started which made the whole situation completely different to what it is today. I think in those days people, they just were[^]nto sure where they were going. I mean the war came and if you went into the army either voluntary of if you were called up irrespective you were in there. It was very hard to even consider what the future held.

What about when you came back from the war?

When I came back from the war I still had only one thing in mind and that was retail. Hoping that we would get sufficient stocks to carry on one of us would make a trip to Sydney every week. Every week we would be down calling on, sometimes staying two and three days calling on manufacturer's pleading with manufacturer[^]s. You know we might of had thirty manufacturer[^]s that we would call on in a period of two days. Most manufacturer[^]s in those days didn't even want ot see you because they didn't need any people calling on them to sell their merchandise. They could ring up one store like the major stores and they could take their complete output. It was very very hard to go to Sydney and you would come back and you might have been lucky enough to get two bedroom suites, one lounge suite and one dining room suite. Stock was so difficult so it made your business week to week depending on how lucky you were to how much stock that you got.

When did it star to rectify itself?

It took about, I don't know whether the tape was on when I mentioned to you regarding lounge furniture how they were barred during the war years, they were not allowed to be made.

Why was that?

Again shortage of materials and most of the people had been caught up in munition works. Most of the factories were converted into materials that were used for the war. This is why so many things were not allowed to be manufactured during that time. I suppose the first, from 1946 that was when we moved into 400 Hunter Street, early 46. The first three or four years would have been very very difficult stock wise and then it just seemed to ease from year to year. I just couldn't put a year on it when everything just became plentiful. Possibly round, round about by the late 50's things started to get back to normal as far as stocks were concerned. We employed a chappy after having been there for about six months we were getting sufficient stock to make things viable. We put a fellow on for a week, we wanted a bit of polishing done. He was a bit of a jack of all trades fellow and we put him on for a week and he stayed with us for about thirty years. That was a shop now where the G.I.O building stands. Do you know the G.I.O. building? Yes.

That's where we were there and we stayed there. Dad I should say purchased the property down at 615 Hunter Street which would have been around the late 50's when he purchased the property that Hustlers were renting that, in those days you couldn't get tenancy out. But eventually Hustlers moved out, we had to wait eight years I think it was. We got notification that they were moving out. Then we modernised the shop and sold the existing property where we were. Dad needed that money for the purchase, not for the purchase of the other one. Well her more or less, he probably borrowed money to buy the other one and then to the mortgage or whatever. It had renovations, it had a complete new shop front on it. Then we traded right up until Saturday morning. We closed the old shop at 400 Hunter Street and we opened the new one on the following Monday morning. We traded right up until the Saturday, we didn't have much to move. We ordered new stock for that new shop, we ended up with reasonable stock that had to be moved down from 400 down to 615. 615 Hunter Street was down where, between the water board and the Gas Company, we probably went there in 1964.

When you were saying about the miners and everyone coming down from Maitland and so forth. When did that type of thing start to slow down?

Actually that really I think happened going back from memory, that was more pre war. When we first started and the early years of the war. Immediately after the war, I'm not too sure about that. That was more or less 1937-38, 39, 40 up until the time that I went away. So we came back and we traded there. We ended with a staff of about eighteen in all at the west end when we more or less finished.

What other changes did you witness in your thirty odd years of trading in the city centre itself?

Well retailing was much the same just up until the time that, there wasn't a great deal of change in retailing. Except until the advent of what we now call discount houses. They were never actually heard of. The first major one to hit Newcastle would have been Sydney Wide. They are no longer in existence but they were the first ones to come to Newcastle. They opened actually directly opposite where we were at 615 Hunter Street. There was a local, Peschiar. John Peschiar, he may have even been before Sydney Wide. He wasn't in a big way like Sydney Wide were. They were of course followed by Norman Ross and that brought really a very different way of retailing, the way that they retailed. Then you got the stage where by as stocks became very plentiful and manufacturers were having problems disposing their stocks. It was like having the boot on the other foot. Like twenty years say ten years prior to that when stock was very hard to get they didn't want to see the retailers and was say a complete reverse say in the following ten years. Then the bigger retail companies were buying a whole lot better than the smaller retailers. More or less the smaller retailers were subsidising the big boys.. Which really you know is not fair competition. Very much the same as the major food stores today with the little corner shops. Most of the little corner shops have gone out of business. If you were not astute in your business with retailing, particularly in the furniture game, the electrical game as well it was very hard to exist really.

When you say astute. Do you mean give very good service?

Well service, there is no substitute for service, there is no substitute for quality and I think the main things one had to know. Number one, you had to buy right. If you couldn't buy right you can't sell right, so you are not being competitive, I mean if you are going to buy on a bad market you can't sell your product to give you sufficient margin to keep your business operating. So it was a matter of say furniture lines would have been easier than white goods. When I say white goods I mean white goods not black goods because it got to a matter of if one of the big major companies were buying Kelvinators at a price and the smaller man found it hard to compete. With furniture you had more of an opportunity of getting exclusive lines and things like that. Different materials and different designs and things like that which made it a little bit easier to get a reasonable margin. But it was very very difficult to compete with the big operators unless you worked that way. You had to be very astute with your buying.

Did that come in during the 1960's?

Yes that started in the sixties. The discount house retailing started in the sixties. We were then, what happened with general retailing would have happened in all fields. We were contacted by a person from Sydney who was having the same problems as all retailers. He was a privately owned furniture store. He wasn't but he was buying for a small group that had been formed called Furniture Co Op Trading or Furniture Trade Buyers Co Op. They had arrived at the idea the

only way the small could compete successfully against the bigger operator was to form a co op of privately owned stores or selected privately owned stores. We were given the opportunity of becoming a member of this co op. Which we did and that helped us and that helped us to know to a great extent because we employed a buyer in Sydney. As years went on the show got better. We would be having buying meeting in Sydney three to four times a year. Our group ended up with over 100 stores, privately owned stores which gave us a very very big buying power.

Did you stay in that group until you closed?

Yes we stayed in that group until we finished . The group is still operating, it is now called Furniture One, they have changed the name but it is still operating. Those Stores came from places like Griffith, Aranda, Canberra, Nowra, Bega, Tamworth, Bourke everywhere all over the state, That was the one way it gave the smaller man opportunity of competing against the big shows because we would get alot of lines made exclusively. Alot of the big manufacturers didn't want to supply Sydney Wide or Norman Ross. The larger accounts the very very big show they threatened that they would stop buying from them if they supplied these discount houses. What happened there was the trade practices bill was bought in and Sydney Wide took a couple of the maufacturers on and won the case. Which meant it was restricting of trade so they had to supply them, they were forced to supply them. Then they used the excuse that they really did not want to buy, they were frightened of losing the big accounts. That was the excuse, that we have no choice we have got to, I mean restrict of trade. The bill has been passed and we have got to supply.

These changes that have happened and the way retail is today. Do you think they are for the better or would you like to see it the way it used to be in the old days?

Well I think really since the self service type of operations came in. I've got to start that again. Apart from the retailing change the buyers have changed. The attitude of the buyer has changed completely. Going back twenty years ago if somebody came into say a furniture store and they wanted to look at a dining room suite. They would be approached usually in a cheerfull manner by a salesman "Can I help you madam? Would you like some help?" They say "Yes I would like to have a look at a dining room suite please". They were seeking the advice of the person that was there who should of known the product if he was worth his wages he should have known all about it. He should have been able to give the client alot of advice. That really was the way I was brought up in selling. With the discount house type of operation the change came that if people wanted to buy something they would walk into one shop and start with the white goods where they wanted to buy a Kelvinator, they would go into one of the discount houses and get the price there and then go around to the others and check it out. So when they were approached in other shops they would say, 'No thanks just looking'. They were not seeking any help and that became more prevalent as years went on.

It's stronger that way now I feel than ever it has been. People think they know all about the product. I think also a lot of people in the retail stores don't know the products they are selling. Perhaps that's one of the reasons looking at it now. But the younger people as they have grown up in the last twenty years, they have got the idea that we know what we want, we don't want to get any information from him. I think they miss out on a lot of things. Not so much perhaps with a refrigerator but a lot in the furniture game where there is a lot of things that people don't know about that can be explained to them if they are prepared to listen. I don't know whether we have been indoctrinated with the self service thing I most certainly don't like the self service.

You would like to see it the way it used to be?

Well I think it was much more pleasant, I think for everybody. The attitudes of the buyer you know have changed so much. Whether they think the salesman is going to tie them up or something I don't know and be a real high pressure type of salesman that could be I don't know. But we can only speak of our own way we never ever believed in that type of operation at all. We always wanted to be able to talk to people to explain to people but certainly not to high pressure at all.

With the city centre the way it is now, with people saying in ten years time it's going to turn into offices with no shops. What do you think about that?

I don't think that will happen. They said the same thing in Sydney when the shopping complexes first started in Sydney. They said there would be nothing in the city, no retailing left in the city. We have more or less followed the pattern of Sydney over the years. Whether I'm right or wrong I don't know but going along the pattern of Sydney I'd say there will always be retailing in the city. The current council are trying to do everything about mono-rails and so forth, you know creating interest back in the city and something has got to be done.

Do you think the things they are coming up with are or will be an advantage to retail?

I couldn't answer that, I wouldn't know that Boyd. My own belief would be if D.J's happened to close in the city the city would be in big trouble because I think they are the drawcard. I know D.J's in the city and the Newcastle central business centre would be in heaps of trouble. That's just my own viewpoint on it.

I was doing a bit of background reading, there is a paper advertisement when you closed down and it said about you having public picnics and things. When did they occur?

That occurred it would have been 1938 something like that. It was a public picnic that we put on at Speers Point Park. It was advertised extensively and there were photos in the Newcastle Herald which are somewhere. I'll have to try and line them up if I can. We had buses, double decker buses, taxis I just can't remember how many taxis there were and buses to transport people. Other people would have gone by bus, in those days. I'm not quite sure how they would of got to Speers Point. There were races organised, sprint races for different age groups, cash prizes were given for it. It was a very big day.

Just a social event?

It was just an advertising event, it was very popular. It was advertised through 2Hd. We had a talent quest also with 2Hd, that was a separate show. It went on for some months.

Did you only have one picnic?

Yes only the one, the war came after that. Everything changed from there on.

But the advent of the motor car has changed retailing so much. Going back twenty five years very few families would have had two motor cars. That's why the shopping centres are there because of the motor car.

Is this because they had access to the centres?

They wouldn't be there if it wasn't for the motor car. I suppose in this day and age it would be very difficult for me to name six people and that are in good health that don't own a motor car. In 1965, sixty, sixty five it wouldn't have been any trouble to name sixty. I would have to stop and think if I was to name six people that are fit and in good health that don't own a car. Can you name any?

No.

So it really did change things.

When did you close your operation in Hunter Street?

Well we decided we would close. We closed on the 30th June, 1984. We started the closing down sale, it would have been the day after Anzac Day 84, that's right. We had big stocks, very big stocks in the end. We were leasing a store in Steel Street we had leased until October. So we were committed to pay rent until October. We thought that if we didn't clear all of our stock by the time April 26 to 30th June. That's when we decided we were

going to close down Hunter Street. We would have moved the stock to Steel Street and had four months that we could have traded from around there to dispose the balance of the stock. As it turned out we didn't need that. Good luck, good management call it what you like. We would have had something in the facinity, something around three hundred thousand dollars in stock when we started the sale. When we finished we had one thousand dollars of stock, so we didn't have to work after, as far selling the stock we didn't. All together it was a very happy association, my association with retailing. I thoroughly enjoyed it, I love retailing, I love selling. If the hours had of remained reasonable I would have still been there.

It said in the paper article that a lot of people were sorry to see people like yourself and Mackies go.

Thats the personal touch that has gone out of it. So many people, Mackies privately owned stores in Newcastle, family owned stores were Mackies, ourselves, that would have been it I guess. Micky Light many years ago, although G.B.'s bought him out many years prior to that. But I think when big public companies come and take over the shows it's not the same. Mackies had a big personal following the same as we did, we carried a similar type of merchandise. We weren't in the very cheap end and not right at the top end but from the middle to the top bracket. Mackies had a very similar type of stock. Actually they were in the same buying group as we were. We were the twos tores but we were selected initially to go into the buying group.

Leo my uncle and myself who had been working together since 1938 except for the period we were in the forces. We had discussed the situation in respect to the extra hours, Thursday night shopping came in and then to go with the discount houses in later years. Some of them were illegally opening all day Saturday and Sunday and public holidays. So we could see eventually this was going to be the norm. That it was going to be seven days a week shopping. We couldn't see much future in that as we were getting older. We felt that we didn't want to just live for work we wanted to work to live. We have worked hard and have had a very successful business and very appreciative of the support we have had in Newcastle over the years. We think that we have gave good service. We have had a lot, a lot of satisfied clients. I guess they weren't all satisfied, we must of had some but they were very much a very very small percentage. We did our utmost to keep everybody happy. If we had any complaints we always made sure they were fixed up. As I said earlier had the hours been reasonable perhaps we may have stayed a bit longer. We had a good innings, we felt the time had come to spend a bit more time with our families and enjoy the rest of our life that we have.

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1989

I, John Thomas Robb give my
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Signed J.T. Robb

Date 17/7/89

Interviewer B. Strimpt



Boyd Stewart

John Salt.

Sabbs' Furniture Store

Transcript An interesting & useful portrait of an influential member of the retailing community - and a history or part of the history of retailing in Newcastle. Interesting information on the origins of the firm, the problems experienced late during & after the war. But also an interesting picture of a man who was enthusiastic about his job & enjoyed retailing, but who mourns the end of retailing as he knew & practised it. His fairly careless typing, Boyd. And there are a number of leads I'd have liked you to follow e.g. the Sabbs, I believe, were Lebanese. What were relations like between other furniture retailers. He hints at these e.g. Mackie, Hyatts etc. But some good material - especially the change from the days when crows came pouring down from the coal fields.

Summary A good summary, if rather brief. $\frac{10}{2\frac{1}{2}}$
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Paper Very brief. Meant to be 1,000 words, Boyd. Some quotes not acknowledged in foot-notes. Some quotes not necessary. The information would be sufficient without direct quotations. Do not use phrases like "complete with the big boys". Nevertheless it is an interesting picture of a part of - not enough relevant. One newspaper article and the interview are not enough.

Tape Poor quality tape, Boyd. Could have been checked earlier. $\frac{4}{10}$
 $\frac{2\frac{1}{2}}{5} \frac{14}{30}$
A bit disappointing, Boyd