

HUNTER REGIONAL HISTORY

RESEARCH PROJECT

MR. BRUCE STEGGLES

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The Steggles family firm is one of the biggest stock feed manufacturing businesses in Australia. It is one of the nation's largest chicken processing operations involved in all stages of the poultry industry, from breeding the chickens through to the distribution of processed poultry products. The firm is helping the Hunter Valley's economy by employing around 1700 people. Mr. Bruce Steggles has been the mainstay of the firm for many years, witnessing both the highs and lows experienced by a hard working, strongly dedicated family business.

The firm was established in 1919 by two brothers, Mr. Jack Steggles (Bruce's father) and Mr. George Steggles, trading as Steggles Bros. They began as produce merchants, selling potatoes and vegetables from their premises in Steel Street, Newcastle West. In the late 1920's, Mr. Jack Steggles decided to move premises to the corner of Tudor and Hunter Streets, Newcastle West. Bruce Steggles said "Many people believed they were silly, because Tudor Street was out in the bush, too far out of town for business."

By the early 1930's the firm prospered and began supplying horse feed, which they bought from South Africa, to the collieries in the Hunter Region, for the pit ponies. Steggles began selling processed chickens in 1928 but this ceased for a number of years in 1942, due to the World War II labour shortages. Around Christmas and Easter when there was a greater demand for chickens, many of the family including Bruce Steggles's mother, Mrs. Marion Steggles, rode pushbikes around Newcastle making deliveries.

Mr. Bruce Steggles did not join the company immediately after leaving school. His father wanted him to gain knowledge of various forms of work, so he worked in the coal mining industry and at Wansey skin and hides company. He joined the R.A.A.F. when World War II began. He was a bomb-aimer, and was shot down over Germany and became a prisoner-of-war in a German camp for about 12 months.

In 1942, Bruce Steggles joined the company as a floor sweeper and in 1950 he became the Managing Director of the stock feed branch in Tudor Street, Newcastle West. Steggles eventually expanded their stock feed manufacturing. They bought stock feed mills at Wyong in 1950, Taree in 1952 and Sydney in 1954.

One of the most important moves which led to a long period of growth was in 1958 when Steggles moved its stock feed manufacturing to Beresfield. Mr. Bruce Steggles was in charge of the Beresfield branch and his brother Warren Steggles became in charge of the Tudor Street branch. The stock feed market began diminishing and technological developments occurred which assisted the chicken processing production, causing the Steggles company to return to the poultry business. The developments which led to the growth in chicken production was in the late 1950's, the introduction of refrigeration in supermarkets, the mechanisation of processing, so that large plants could be established, and airtight plastic bags. Steggles began processing chickens at the Beresfield plant in 1962 and the venture became so successful that the company was selling up to 800,000 chickens per week.

To fulfil this high demand, the Steggles company began mass production at farm level. They established a network of two hundred independent contract chickens growers around the Central Coast and Hunter Region. Breeding farms were set up at Morpeth, Black Hill and Hinton.

At the Beresfield plant, over one million eggs per week were hatched and the baby chickens were transported to the farms. When the chickens had grown, they were then sent back to Beresfield to be processed. Steggles also have one hundred and sixty broiler growers in the Hunter Region who raise birds on a contract basis.

Steggles places emphasis on genetic research, disease prevention and flock husbandry. Vaccine laboratories have been established at Black Hill, making Steggles leaders in the advancement of poultry disease elimination. The benefits of the research that is carried out in the laboratories are

passed on to poultry growers via a field advisory service that covers all aspects of poultry care. Considerable scientific effort is placed on the maintenance and improvement of the genetic characteristics of Steggles breeds of birds. The high quality which they are noted for is due to the high meat, low fat attributes.

The processing procedure takes place as follows. Ten large automatic incubators at Beresfield each hold 90,000 eggs. The eggs are turned automatically every hour. After eighteen days these eggs are then relocated to the hatching incubators. For most of the day-old chicks they then begin a life that will last only nine weeks. The chicks have the sharp end of their beaks cut off with an electric knife and are vaccinated against disease. The birds are vaccinated in the wing. The chickens then undergo a controlled scientific feeding process to discover which chickens grow the fastest and the best feed. The chickens are weighed periodically. Those chickens which appear to be the best meat growers are separated from the rest and used for breeding.

When the chickens are to be slaughtered they are captured in their enclosures during the night and put in crates ready for transportation to the abattoirs. At the abattoirs, machines, kill, pluck and behead the chickens. A long assembly line of chickens hanging by their legs go through the stages of processing by process operators. Each process operator has a specific task. One of them incisions a cut, another one disembowels, while another scrapes out the insides, another segregates the giblets for cleaning and packaging, and another folds up the legs and neck into the body.

The chickens are then washed and the last wash is done in ice cold water to prepare the body of the chicken for freezing latter on. Each chicken is then weighed, code numbered and placed in a fully sealed plastic bag and put in the freezer. Steggles has a large range of products which include fresh and frozen whole chicken and chicken pieces, poultry smallgoods including chicken roll. Pre-cooked poultry including country fried chicken, oven roasted chicken and turkey schnitzel. Fresh

and frozen ducks, turkeys and turkey pieces, Day old chicks and stock feed.

In 1968, Steggles established a £1000 scholarship to the Sydney University. The scholarship consisted of a post-graduate course in poultry nutrition. At that time it was the first scholarship inaugurated in that field.

In that same year, 1968, the Steggles company established the well known Henny Penny fried chicken outlets. Steggles was the first business in Australia to branch into fast food. Mr. Bruce Steggles went to the United States for a holiday and while he was there he encountered Mr. Chet Wagner who owned the Henny Penny trade name and had ideas of an international franchise structure. Mr. Steggles and Mr. Wagner worked out an arrangement and in 1968, Steggles opened the first Henny Penny store on the corner of Mitchell and Ridge Streets, Merewether, in an ex service station. Bruce Steggles said the reason for establishing the Henny Penny chain of stores was to increase profitability and to control sales. The Henny Penny stores have now grown to eleven in the Newcastle and surrounding areas. These are Merewether, Georgetown, Belmont, Charlestown, Newcastle West, Nelson Bay, East Maitland, Cessnock, Edgeworth, Jesmond and a new one at Broadmeadow. In 1981, Mr. Bruce Steggles's daughters, Dianne and Cathy, became joint managing directors of Henny Penny Pty Ltd and they work from the office and warehouse at Wallsend.

In 1980, Steggles Holdings Ltd were bought out by the British based conglomerate Amatil Ltd, whom are a large tobacco, food and beverage company. Bruce Steggles said the reason for his decision to sell was mainly due to his desire to retire but also because placements and share issues had lowered the family's ownership. Mr. Steggles said that the family always thought that a takeover would occur one day and when Amatil propositioned them, they decided now was the time to sell. The Steggles family still own the Henny Penny chain of stores which they purchased from Amatil in 1981. Also, in the same year, Mr. Alan Steggles, the son of Mr. George Steggles,

bought back from Amatil, the fruit and vegetable business now operating as Alan Steggles Produce Pty Ltd at the Sandgate markets. Bruce Steggles's brother, Warren Steggles owns and operates the stock feed division from the Tudor street, store in Newcastle West.

Bruce Steggles feels that the success of his family business was due to the company policy and the excellent staff who were full of enthusiasm and dedication. Mr. Steggles also feels that the poultry industry will certainly keep thriving and expanding. He also feels that the increase in chicken consumption will not damage the beef industry. Instead it will help improve the Australian economy by making more beef available for export.

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Signed ... *J. B. Steggle* (Interviewee)

Date ... *17.9.87*

Interviewer ... *Susan Meldrum*

J. B. Steggle
per
Marion Steggle