

A STORY OF SUVA IN THE MID-20TH CENTURY: STEELE'S CENTRAL STORE

By Rex Steele

On the corner of Renwick Road and Pier Street across the road from the Garrick Hotel there was a neglected corner shop that was being ineptly run by a sick elderly man called Caldwell. In 1948 [my parents] Rurik [Rex] and Maude Steele took over the lease, which also included remnants of a book and magazine business, and in the back a defunct Kava Saloon.



The building as it looks today, viewed across Renwick Road and looking down Pier Street. Photo courtesy Bart van Aller, 2016

The store was cleaned out, and the rubbish deposited in boxes on the footpath for removal. There was difficulty persuading the local rubbish removers to co-operate until Dad hit upon the idea of leaving a couple of trinkets, pencils or rubbers visible in the trash, upon which there was a fight to see who could collect our rubbish first. The only artifact from that beginning still remaining is now my coconut shell bilo which belonged to Sir Maynard Hedstrom one of the early commercial pioneers in the country, who set up the firm of Morris Hedstrom which became prominent throughout the Pacific in the early 20th century. There was an old tea chest in the saloon that had been used to drop kava dregs and rubbish into, and when it was moved it was discovered to be literally almost full of cockroaches.

Dad explained to the Landlord that the wooden floor was mostly rotten and a concrete floor was laid. Dad decided that they would continue with the books and magazines, and placed an order for a selection of English magazines that required payment in advance, and he and Mum spent a sleepless night wondering how this was going to be done.

He approached, cold, Sir Henry Scott, (Maurice Scott's father) acting for the Landlord, and the foremost, richest and most powerful lawyer in the town and asked him what he should do. Without knowing anything about Dad, Sir Henry offered to guarantee his overdraft with the local Bank of New Zealand. According to Mum Sir Henry had 'taken a shine' to Dad and so this forty five year old qualified Electrical Wireman had managed to persuade the toughest businessman in the town to back him, and business commenced.



(L) Rurik Steele. Photo courtesy Mrs Maude Steele.



(R) Sir Henry Scott. Photo courtesy Owen Scott.

The magazines were imported in bulk, by sea, on a monthly basis and were then redistributed mainly by local mail to subscribers. This meant that Mum had to keep track of all sales with a series of cards filed in trays, roll and wrap the magazines, either singly or in groups depending on what had been ordered, tie with brown string initially, and later with specially printed 'Steele's Central Store' flat yellow twine, with red edges.

These were then posted out around the colony, or delivered by hand to local customers, Mum recalling being asked by an Indian lad who worked at the shop for a while if there were 'any papers for the dead box maker', (Pattern and Storck) when delivering to the local undertaker. Dad also recalls a Fijian lad asking if there were any jobs. Dad said, 'Yes I do have one, the grass needs mowing at home', whereupon the lad replied, 'But that's work Boss, you got any other kind of jobs?'

Books were on display, and from a relatively early age I was allowed, if very, very careful to read some of them as they arrived in the store. I had taken avidly to reading, having

started at school with a reading book made for me by Mum from a copy borrowed through a mother from another child, as after the war many items, including schoolbooks, were still in short supply.

Dad started to look around for other products to sell, and as he had always sought out quality products, commenced to be a manufacturer's representative for Mobo toys. These were high quality steel ride on toys; bucking bronco, rocking horse, snail, small bike with trainer wheels, scooter and merry go round, and over the decades Jo and I have encountered them still going strong in unexpected places. I recall being asked one Saturday to wrap up an assembled two person ride on merry-go-round for a birthday party with brown paper and string so it would be unrecognizable through the wrapping. Quite a challenge! Wrapping became a skill sister Jo and I developed before the invention of sticky tape.

Nu-Swift fire extinguishers did well and Dad did his best to work in with the Fiji Fire Service, and the Fire Chief was a family friend. I recall the Head Salesman of Nu-Swift, Eric Cawood visiting Suva and attending a fire extinguishing demonstration on the beach next to the Fire Station where he embarrassed a big Fijian fireman who was using the extinguisher by rushing in and directing the extinguisher down to the base of the fire rather than at the flames further up where it was doing no good. Apparently also his shoes were burnt.

We had gas refilling equipment in the shop and once when Dad was using it a valve leaked causing a noisy gushing of gas from the cylinder. It terrified me and I fled from the area. Dad told me later that it was foolish to run away before you had ascertained the cause of an unexpected action, and ever since I have been conscious of the speed of my reactions in assessing an unexpected event, overcoming the initial spontaneous reaction, and continuing in a controlled way. I've always felt that it was developed in that event.

Dad taught himself to be a very good salesman and he often went away on selling trips around the island, and occasionally on the Matua or Tofua to the other Pacific Islands. When he left Fiji a very detailed and flattering letter was received from Nu Swift's Head, Find Graucob, explaining in detail how effective he had been per head of population as a salesman, and encouraging him to consider continuing his work in New Zealand if he settled there, as Australia already had representatives.

Hubbocks Patent White Zinc Paint was used in the Caribbean where they painted the house rooves white to keep them cool. Dad thought the same idea could be introduced in Fiji, but it never seemed to catch on. Rooves were red or green and that was that. We also carried Dulux coloured enamels and paint brushes, and Mum was surprised by the Governor's wife appearing in the shop one day to purchase a small tin of orange paint which she confided to Mum was to paint their Government House toilet seat. Hope they didn't use it before it was properly dry.

As we sold paint Dad decided to paint the shopfront as an advert. We all remember it vividly: Jo says it was red, Mum yellow, and me green. A local signwriter painted a multicoloured sectioned rainbow over one of the shop windows. Reg Malthis impressed me by announcing that he would then nip off and have a spot of breakfast, I was surprised that he had not had breakfast by ten o'clock, but only learnt recently that breakfast meant a trip across the road to the Garrick Hotel, as he was an alcoholic.

Uniport buildings were essentially single rooms that could be constructed of aluminium or galvanized sections for walls and rooves which could each be carried by a single person, and bolted together wherever there was a flat area. We have encountered them since traveling in Fiji and recently in Africa, and they are very evocative of a formative period of our lives. Dad solicited members of his Rotary Club for a working bee to erect one for demonstration purposes near the swimming pool. Unfortunately the Health Department would not sanction them on the grounds of hygiene and lack of ventilation so they were not successful.

Over the years of its life the shop held agencies for 'Edmunds Acto Baking Powder', Moore and Johnston men's suiting, and rust-preventative Plus-Gas and Scotchlite reflecting tape. Academy patterns were ordered from a catalogue, and Mum was rung at home by the governor's wife having been told that she had a pattern for men's pyjamas as her husband Sir Ronald Garvey needed some new ones. Mum said that she had one of her own and would be happy to cut one from it, but that it would only be in newspaper. Lady Garvey replied that that would be perfectly acceptable, and that she would send the chauffeur around to the shop to pick it up. I'm surprised Mum wasn't made a Dame of The British Empire for that service to the Colony.

Mum bought baskets in the market and resold them to the burgeoning tourist trade. An old Chinese man appeared one day with one for sale that was similar to one they had on display. When he'd left they realized that the old bugger had cleverly sold them one of their own stock.

We sold Craven A cigarettes, Dr Paley bought 20 Craven Plain each day in a green packet and asked for the cellophane to be removed. Mum recalled him later on leaning against the shop door in agony and confiding that he had cancer, and saying that on this occasion the physican could not heal himself. A packet of 10 sold for one shilling and a penny ha'penny, so change was easy from the till, you worked backwards through the till, halfpenny, penny, threepence, sixpence, to give change for a florin.

Mum checked the change collected every day and over the years for English threepences which looked like the Fijian ones, and Edward VIII pennies. These were collectors items as there were only two countries in the Empire where the coinage had been released prior to his coronation. She found thirty five pennies but no threepences.

At the back of the shop there was a small area where Mum presided over morning teas for various hangers on, who might include Harry LeVesconte the fireman, Percy Rostance, retired builder, Freddy Becket, architect. She also often provided lunches for us when we galloped home from our GGS and BGS schools. One of us would sometimes be dispatched to the local Chinese City Café with a little aluminum bowl with wire fastening to hold the lid, to collect a serving of Chow Mein, or Chop Suey, or to Wing On Tai for a hot tank loaf.

This area had no toilet, and if we needed to go, we would wee in a receptacle that was emptied down the sink, or if it was more serious used newspaper on the floor that was then wrapped up and put in the rubbish bin. I remember Dad once driving home rather than using the shared convenience reluctantly made available to tenants, upstairs in the building.

As the business became established, and as Mum, who did the accounts said, continued to make a modest living for the family, Dad became a member of the Rotary Club, where

there was supposed to be a representative of each profession, and the Chamber of Commerce. He rose to become President of Rotary.

Much of the detail of the charitable work done by the Rotary Club was handled by Mum at the shop, as was her PTA work for the schools, where she took bookings for school events, organized rosters for the canteen, and banked the takings. Her pickled onions for school fairs were also keenly sought after. Rotary undertook a huge fundraising exercise that included a raffle, and much of the detail fell to Mum.

When ticket sales lagged I suggested that a bundle of raffle tickets be wrapped as gifts and given to every member of the Club, which Dad presented at a meeting with the rejoinder that they not be opened until they got home. He remembers a guffaw of laughter from one member, Serge Tetzner, local roading contractor who it was alleged was paid by the mile for his colony roads which had never ending bends. He had disobeyed the instruction, and later bought the whole bundle himself rather than have to sell them.

Jo sold raffle tickets from a desk outside the shop and her commissions enabled her to buy a 'P' class yacht, in which she went on to scoop the pool in trophies for several years. The raffle was a huge exercise and caused much worry to Mum. During this time she developed a massive carbuncle on her lower back, and coincidentally, thirty years later at the same age I also had one in the same place.

In the middle period of the life of the shop when things seemed to be going fairly well they decided on a facelift. Freddy Becket was asked to design a new look showroom, and he suggested a three tiered square stand in the middle of the area to display stock, and act as an eyecatcher. Mum also suggested a change of name, and although the bank manager commented that it sounded a bit pretentious 'Steele's of Suva' was reborn. During this period also Mum had instituted a regular savings policy of salting away the equivalent of a wage for herself.

In 1959 I gained University Entrance, and after a year in the Upper Sixth would need to go overseas to University. I remember Dad confiding to me that the shop was not been doing well, and the town had the first of several 'Race Riots' fueled by various underlying financial and political factors. During this uncertainty a decision was made to return to New Zealand, after Dad had made an exploratory trip to Australia to see whether a future could be made there.

He entered protracted negotiations with Millers Limited to sell the goodwill he had built up in the Nu-Swift agency, and finally a satisfactory figure of one thousand pounds was agreed upon. An auction was held to clear the remainder of the stock, and I recall Dad being appalled at the price that his stock of paint brushes was fetching, and I suggesting to him that he try to withdraw some of them and keep them himself, without success.

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