**Gummer’s Department Store**

**“A Satisfied Customer is Our Best Friend”**

**IMAGINE IF** – you could travel back in time to 1907. You can feel for Selina Gummer who stepped off the train at Morrinsville as a new bride to a place she later described as “the last place God made, and also forgot to finish”.

She had married Charles Moginie Gummer, the new proprietor of Gummer’s General Merchants of Thames Street Morrinsville. In 1907 there were only a few shops in the town, and Gummer’s were the only store on the north side of Thames Street. There were hitching posts for the horses along the street, deep ditches and wooden bridges across them, one unfortunate gentleman slipped into one going to a meeting which was then postponed until he could go home to get changed. The roads were so bad in winter mud was knee deep and boxes were laid down in the street so people could leap from box to box to get across. Gummer’s had the first telephone to be installed to a business (the phone number was 4 and Post Office Box number 1 which Judy Barrett, daughter of Buster Gummer still retains) and Charles Gummer had on occasion to get up in the night to ring through for help in medical emergencies. Banking was done once a week in Hamilton prior to any banks having a branch in Morrinsville, and if you think Thames Street is too narrow, a committee was formed to fight to have the road widened as it had become the main throughfare by the 1880’s, but building along the street started before this could be agreed to.

To understand the origins of this iconic Morrinsville business, we go back to one of the first stores in Morrinsville. Even’s & Mowbray built a store and later added accommodation with a liquor license on the corner of Pickett Place & Studholme Street in 1873 (known as the Jolly Cripple). This coincided with Thomas Morrin’s purchase of three large Maori land blocks totalling approximately 26,000 acres, which he combined to establish the Lockerbie Estate. Supplies and accommodation were needed for workers on the estate and the hotel with a liquor license became very popular indeed. The hotel lost its liquor license to the newly built Nottingham Castle Hotel in 1877 and the store was then taken over by Mr Thomas Rowe and the hotel became first a Temperance Hotel, then later a private residence. The main thoroughfare of Morrinsville shifted from Studholme Street to Thames Street due to the recently discovered goldfields in Thames and Te Aroha, and Thomas Morrin having his fingers in a lot of pies and in particular, mining interests in these places, quickly saw the benefit of directing traffic from Hamilton through his main street and hence the name Thames Street.

In 1883 Thomas Rowe followed suit in shifting his business and built a small store on Thames Street measuring 18 feet x 22 feet (6m x 7m). He didn’t occupy it for long as he sold in the same year to Mr Henry Clifford who in 1888 was joined by his brother John Clifford and they continued trading as H & J Clifford General Store until 1907 when they sold to Charles Moginie Gummer. Charles Gummer had been involved in wholesale, retail and import businesses in Wellington and Dunedin. He was joined briefly by his brother Alf for four years until he retired due to ill health. It was a typical country store when taken over, customers could buy groceries, patent medicines, drapery and hardware, agricultural supplies and there was a bakery attached. In 1912 when Alf retired, parts of the business were sold. The bakery to Mr W Morrice, the grocery to Mr Thomas Empson and the ironmongery and timber business to Mr J C R Watts. Charles retained the drapery and clothing business which was then considerably extended.

In a town still in its infancy, the extent of the expansion and his faith in the town prospering, is rather breathtaking. In 1912 he expanded the frontage to 80 feet wide with plate glass windows and two main entrances. On entering, to the right was the men’s outfitting department stocked with men's and boy’s clothing, mercery (haberdashery), hats, rugs, travelling bags, trunks, leggings, boots etc. Also, a large stock of stationery and fancy goods. Continuing further into the store was the furniture showroom featuring bedsteads, mattresses, linoleum, carpet etc. Passing through a sliding door was the bedding and packing room where all kinds of kapok and flax mattresses, pillows and bolsters were stocked. Accessed from the men’s department was the general drapery department, including manchester and ladies' lines which included calicos, ladies’ underclothing; also, ladies and children's boots and shoes and many other lines. Further on from this department was the millinery room, resplendent with stock of all the latest in ladies’ hats, coats, costumes, dressing jacket etc. Beyond this was a new convention, the fitting room, where ladies could try on any article they wished.

The premises were brilliantly lit with acetylene gas supplied by two generators, they also supplied the gas to the premises occupied by the grocer and the baker. Gummer’s were by then considered to be the most up to date and progressive establishment outside of the large cities and Morrinsville was well served. On the matter of lighting, kerosene lamps were the early means of illumination, then came acetylene gas lamps, followed by benzine gas lighting and finally the store was lit by electricity in 1922. It was not until 1931 that the shop’s frontage was lit by the installation of community lighting lamps.

Gummer’s expanded again in 1936 to 10,835 square feet, and installed central heating providing congenial conditions to not only the shopping public, but to the staff as well. At the same time the Lamson pneumatic tube cash dispatch system was installed, a method of handling cash to speed up business. The advent of large department stores required the speedy movement of cash from the counter to a secure office and change sent back again. I’m sure there are still plenty of people who still remember the sound of the shuttle whizzing overhead to the central office. The two department stores I remember having the Lamson system are Gummer’s in Morrinsville and Calvert’s in Cambridge, a section of the cash railway was installed in the Cambridge Museum after Calvert’s closed. This era is also important in my family history as my father Reg Pickett, prior to WW2 worked in Gummer’s and in his words, was dressing a window one day and happened to gaze upon a smartly dressed woman walking past, and he was instantly smitten. Hastening to the footpath, he obtained her phone number (forward or what!) and despite waiting through the intervening war years, Joan Ross from Cambridge married Reg Pickett in 1946 and here we happily are. Working in Gummer’s fed Dad’s innate peacock style and love of dressing, inherited in spades by my gloriously sartorially eccentric brother Ritchie.

Charles Gummer passed away in 1947 and his son Ernest Edward (Buster) Gummer took over as manager.

In 1955 Buster modernised and replaced the plate glass frontage, built a cantilevered verandah, created larger doorways and upgraded the lighting. While efforts were made to continually modernise and upgrade the store, with competition from the larger department stores in Hamilton and the relative ease to travel there by previously loyal customers, the decision was made in 1964 to sell the land and buildings to the Farmers Trading Company. Later businesses in the building have included Deka and Noel Leeming. Buster and his wife Margaret then opened a gift shop across the road specialising in Crown Lynn which was the most popular brand of household homeware at the time, and their daughter Judy worked there after school taking bookings for the Regent picture theatre for which they were the booking agent.

A business that had traded for 80 years and was almost as old as Morrinsville itself. If you are wondering where this business was, my first line might give it away, ‘Imagine If’ now occupies the original building and if you walk inside, you can still see traces of the old architecture and Art Deco decoration.

Mrs Selina Gummer was interviewed at the age of 87 about her recollections of Gummer’s and early Morrinsville. Here are some excerpts; “although the mail came to the post office which was situated in the railway station, farmers were unable to come into town to collect it during the day. Arrangements were made to have pigeonholes at Gummer’s and mail was delivered from the railway station to there. Consequently, the store was often open until midnight and open every day of the week, it was looked on as a meeting place and people coming for mail would hold supper parties in the store. Supplies for the store would come either by boat up the Piako River to the landing by the Studholme Street bridge, or by road depending on cartage costs and the state of the roads. The exception being gunpowder, boats wouldn’t carry this commodity, so it was always conveyed by cart – an all day trip to and from Te Aroha by a very brave person”.

Stand across the street from 199 Thames Street and look above the verandah and you can still see Gummer’s on the brick side wall of the property to the left. A reminder of an iconic progressive business that was at the heart of an emerging small town under the stewardship of the Gummer family and I can only hope that whoever the current owner is, they don’t tear down this fabulous piece of our history.

Penny Pickett

Morrinsville Museum