



TOWN OF  
VICTORIA PARK



# Interview with Rod McGhee

*Interviewed by Heather Campbell  
February 2018*

## **Victoria Park Voices**

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# **Interview with Rod McGhee**

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# Interview with Rod McGhee

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Rod McGhee, December 2016 (Photo by T. Segers)



## INTRODUCTION

Rodney Alexander McGee was born 1941 in Subiaco, the first child of Alexander Daniel McGhee and his wife Eva (nee Hodges). He had two siblings, Winifred and Milton.

The family lived in Beaufort Street, Mt Lawley, where Alexander McGhee, assisted by his parents, had bought a small newsagency. He was anxious to expand into a larger business and in the late forties or early fifties, the family moved to a newsagency with more potential at 883 Albany Highway. During the six or seven years spent there, Rod McGhee went to East Victoria Park Primary School. He completed his education at Kent Street High School after the family and the newsagency had transferred to purpose-built premises at 869 Albany Highway; a move prompted by his father's wish to own the building which housed the business. After leaving school Rod McGhee secured work with Atkins Carlyle, acquiring stock control skills in the seven years he remained there.

From a young age, he assisted in the work of the newsagency, learning the newsboys' rounds in case he was needed and assembling Cyclops toys. In his early twenties Rod McGhee came into the business more fully when his parents went away on a trip, serving 'an apprenticeship of sorts' to learn the ropes before taking over completely. The business grew and he extended the range of stock, priding himself on his customer service. He worked in this challenging commercial environment until the Newsagency closed in 2017.

There is commentary on the newsagencies at 883 Albany Highway and at 869 Albany Highway, including reasons for relocation, layout and family accommodation. Many aspects on the sale and delivery of newspapers are covered, including rolling and wrapping and the equipment used to achieve this. Deliveries by newsboys, by vehicle, and newspaper rounds are also detailed. Accounting processes are explained.

The purchase of the block at 869 Albany Highway is discussed, as is the layout and design of the new building and alterations to it over the years. Purchase of stock and the establishment of direct accounts with manufacturers are also discussed. Where possible personal visits were made to assess the quality of the product. Mr McGhee visited schools, acquiring book lists to ensure that he had stocks at hand at back-to-school time

Stock included not only newspapers, magazines, comics and specialty cards, but also items such as giftware, souvenirs, toys and Burley footballs. A very extensive range of stationery was also carried. The regulations covering the sale of goods which could not be sold after 6pm, and measures taken to conform are also included.



Personalities, customers and staff are featured and work routines and working hours are outlined, including Mr McGhee's personal daily routine.

As the family were from a Methodist background and Mr McGhee is a member of the Uniting Church, Lotto tickets were not sold and Mr McGhee did not open the shop on a Sunday. He did however make provision for the sale of *Sunday Times* for those who wished to purchase it and describes the consequent use of honesty boxes and newspaper boys for the sale of newspapers.

Despite attempts at diversification, the rise of digital media and the impact of competition from a nearby shopping centre, Officeworks and Target, affected the business. Rod McGhee talks of the closure and sale of the business and of a period of indifferent health when he 'finally realised' he couldn't 'keep throwing newspapers at 75' and 'getting up at 3 o'clock, as he had done for the last forty years'.

The interview, which was conducted in January and February 2018, is contained in 4 hours 30 minutes of recording. The transcript has been lightly edited to enhance readability.

## TRANSCRIPT

This is an interview with Rod McGhee for the Town of Victoria Park held at his home in Lockridge on Tuesday 30 January 2018. The interviewer is Heather Campbell.

Rod can we start off with your full name and your date and place of birth please?

**McGHEE:** Okay. Well my full name is Rodney Alexander McGhee. I was born in Subiaco, in Perth, in 1941. My birthday is 18 September 1941.

HC Tell me about your dad, what was his name?

**McGHEE:** Well his name was Alexander Daniel McGhee. I am not sure, but he was either born in Perth, or he was born in Mt Magnet. Mount Magnet is where his parents lived.

HC I should say at this stage that you've got a lovely a family history book, written by the family and I've copied the relevant pages to get your grandparents' story. I'll append that to the transcript, so we can concentrate just really on your dad and your mum to start off with<sup>1</sup>.

**McGHEE:** Okay. That was my dad. My mother Eva McGhee, she had no middle name, she lived down in Spearwood in Rockingham Road. There's a small railway line that goes across near their place. Her mother had to bring up the children on her own. That railway line used to go down to the Watsonia factory that used to slaughter pigs and make ham and all the rest of it. We also had holidays down there with my grandmother.

HC By 'we' – you had brothers and sisters?

**McGHEE:** Yes. My sister being Winifred McGhee and my brother being Milton McGhee. Today my sister Win – or Winifred is her full name – is living actually living down in Capel. Originally she married a farmer when they were at Williams. She was a trained nurse, fresh out of Royal Perth Hospital and there was a country hospital nearby – I just can't remember it off the top of my head at the moment – and she met Graham Savage down there and they later married. My brother Milton, he was a bit younger than me. There was two years between me and my sister and then another two with my brother. Milton went to Wesley College and then later to Curtin University. Then later, after getting his degree – I am not too sure what his degree was, but he went into social work. He got a job with the courts in Canberra. He was there for quite a few years. He had three children over there, that was Jocelyn, Bronwyn and David. Over time they came to WA. Milton was stationed out at Hyden as a counsellor for the farmers that were getting greatly distressed because of the drought. He covered a very

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<sup>1</sup> See Attachment One following this transcript.

large territory at different times – at the time the Federal Government had at least half a dozen people like Milton set up in the country.

HC           When you guys were little your parents had a newsagency in Beaufort Street how did that come about? This was Mount Lawley wasn't it?

**McGHEE:**   That's right, it was at 563 Beaufort Street. Well my parents, particularly my father, wanted to get into a newsagency business. I think they were either in West Perth or somewhere like that. Dad was keen to get into a newsagency and they bought into a small newsagency in Beaufort Street, Mt Lawley. At that time my paternal grandparents worked with my father. Then Dad met Eva, who had a dressmaking shop nearby and consequently later they got married<sup>2</sup>. When I came along in '41 we used to live in a small house behind a shop in Clarence Street which was a very short distance across the road from where the newsagency was. We had my brother and sister there. My father built, probably with my grandfather, a small room on the side of the house that butted onto the verandah. Things at that time were a little bit primitive, for example when my mother did the washing it was in the copper. A fire had to be lit up underneath and heat the water. That was what had happened in that era.

HC           What are your memories of that first newsagency as a little boy?

**McGHEE:**   Well Dad sold a full range of magazines, papers, a few toys – though toys were hard to get by that time. I remember my father saying that he bought a case of toys that had been partly broken – they were new, but they just didn't work and Dad set to and fixed them and made them work and then sold them. Dad used to sell a small range of chemist lines, just things like cough medicine I suppose and headache tablets. Then he also sold a small range of paint and he used to sell bottles of kerosene. I suppose there was confectionary. A lot of it just wasn't easily available because everything was rationed.

HC           I think they were in Mt Lawley from about 1934 to 1949 weren't they?

**McGHEE:**   I think they were there in 1935...<sup>3</sup> [pause]

HC           So they running the newsagents through some of the difficult years of the Depression and the war years then?

**McGHEE:**   Well yes, definitely.

HC           Why didn't your dad go to the war?

**McGHEE:**   He was called up and he was marched through some of the hills around Northam, I think, but at the time there was a lot of dandelions growing in the paddocks

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<sup>2</sup> Possibly in 1939 or 1940. See Attachment Two this transcript.

<sup>3</sup> *Wise's Post Office Directory* for 1934-1935, lists McGhee & Sons, newsagents at 569 Beaufort Street, Highgate Hill and the POD for 1941, at 563 Beaufort Street, Highgate Hill. In 1949 the business is still listed as at 563 Beaufort Street. *Wise's Post Office Directories* in WA ceased publication after that date.

and they gave Dad hay fever. Then, because Dad got hay fever, the Army wasn't keen to take him on. But they also said to Dad that because he was a newsagent and selling magazines that he was important in helping the morale of the people that were left behind. At that time Dad had a team of boys selling *Daily News*. I think on Sundays he also used to sell the *Sunday Times*; he might have even delivered a few by pushbike. Those were the times. Dad was also involved in the ARP<sup>4</sup> I can't remember much about that time; I guess I was too young. But I do remember him having a box of special pieces of round metal, probably aluminium, and we just used to amuse ourselves quite easily. I remember my grandfather building a ladder with a step up so I could look over the fence. [Laughs] That was quite useful. One thing in my mind is one Sunday morning a milk cart was coming down Vincent Street. I think the horse had bolted and the guy couldn't stop the horse, but anyway it went straight into a tram and demolished the tram and killed the horse. There was bottles of milk everywhere and glass and the tram was all smashed in the front. They took the horse off, I believe, to the zoo. [Laughs]

HC Rod, what was your mum's maiden name?

**McGHEE:** Her maiden name was Hodges.

HC Was the dress shop she had her own shop?

**McGHEE:** Well I think she would have rented it.

HC But she was the owner of the business though?

**McGHEE:** Oh I would say so.<sup>5</sup>

HC So your dad had delivery boys and had the *Sunday Times* and the *Daily News*?

**McGHEE:** That's right, but we didn't have the delivery of the *West Australian*, that was run by a business further down Beaufort Street, towards Perth. The main paper in that time was the *West Australian*. At that time then, nearly everybody bought the paper, whether they bought in a shop or a newsstand or had it delivered. Anyway Dad spoke to, I suppose, the *West* as well as the *Sunday Times* and the *Daily News*, he let them know that he was eager to get into a larger newsagency with a round.

One day a chap – he was called Nobby Clark – he was to do with the *Sunday Times* – he wanted Dad to come out to Vic Park and take over the shop and round in East Victoria Park. That was some time in 1953. So we eventually did that. It was quite a move to sell the business at 563 Beaufort Street and then move over to Vic Park.

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<sup>4</sup> Air Raid Precautions in which wardens were used.

<sup>5</sup> *Wise's Post Office Directory 1937-1938* lists Miss Eva Hodges, dressmaker at 570 Beaufort Street, Highgate Hill.

HC            Was he managing the business for Nobby Clark, or did he buy the business?

**McGHEE:**    He bought the business, but Nobby Clark was the sales manager of the *Sunday Times*. As a family we didn't move to Vic Park until 1953. We moved to 883 Albany Highway. I used to have a silver tray which had a farewell from the Forrest Park Church to my parents and that was dated 1953.

I became sick, which forced me to give over. I asked my sons to close the business down because at that stage we realised that we probably couldn't sell it as a business, because it really wasn't making a profit. We had lots of customers and lots of contacts and things like that, but the shopping centre up the road took most of the business. We never had a lottery, something my dad didn't agree with because that was part of gambling, because he was a reasonably strong member of the Methodist Church – they were anti-gambling and Dad certainly went along with that.

HC            Well we can cover that later, but let's talk about 883 – what are your memories of 883 Albany Highway?

**McGHEE:**    At 883, there was the shop and then the house behind and then there was a shed which butted onto the laneway, where we kept the Austin A40 Tourer. There were also benches there that we used to roll the newspapers on. The newspapers then were rolled by hand. So you rolled them up and then bent them over a bench so that they came out like the shape of a banana. Then you'd be able to roll probably a bundle of newspapers maybe in about ten minutes because you got very quick at doing it and papers were thin enough to do that. I also remember helping my father renovate the house before we moved there, because the walls were painted with a calcimine paint<sup>6</sup>, or whatever you call it. That needed to be cleaned down, washed down, scrubbed down, and then repainted, to make the house liveable for us as a family to move in there.

HC            How many bedrooms did you have?

**McGHEE:**    I think it was two bedrooms but there was also a verandah section between the house and the shop. It was a closed in verandah. I remember myself sleeping on a bed in part of that closed in verandah on one side. I remember my sister Win had a bed on the other side and my brother Milton – I am not sure where he slept.

HC            *Wise's Post Office Directory* of 1949 lists the newsagency as being owned by William Keating.

**McGHEE:**    Well he was a parliamentarian and he bought the business and gave it to, probably his son-in-law, who was a chap named Hollier. As far as I knew at the time that's who we bought the business from. When we bought the business and moved,

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<sup>6</sup> Also referred to as kalsomine or distemper paint made from dried calcium carbonate mixed with water and sometimes pigment or glue. It was easy to use and fast drying. It was popular in the 1930s.

one of the ladies who helped him a lot was lady by the name of Esme McAllister, who I grew to know a lot about. She had three daughters and she used to go around to the houses in the district where the papers were delivered and collect the money for them. Mum and Dad, with Esme, gradually built up the shop business, because of the experience that Dad had - and Dad got on very well with the customers. At that time there was a massive influx of migrants that came to the area because of the Second World War. So we had a lot of Italians in the area, we had quite a few Dutch and there was a few – even – Germans and a few Greeks. They all contributed to what Vic Park has become.

HC Did the newsagency carry foreign language newspapers, Rod?

**McGHEE:** At one stage you could get a Dutch/Australia paper, but we didn't actually carry a lot of foreign papers. Some of the foreign papers were available from some of the restaurants. Some of the Chinese type ones were available from some of the places. Then there were other sort of foreign newspapers. But there wasn't too many places around in Vic Park that actually had foreign newspapers. I know there were a few in Perth - but today there's probably a dozen or more foreign language papers.

HC The migrants that used to come into the newsagents, what would they buy; would they buy the *West Australian* and the *Daily News*.

**McGHEE:** Well they certainly bought papers because if you were looking for a job one of the places you had to look was in the classified section of the *West Australian* and the *Sunday Times*. I think the *Daily News* had a classified section as well. So if you were looking for a job that's the places that you had to look at if you wanted a job. I know there was quite a few Italians in the area, they had the building, labouring jobs and some of them were builders themselves, which I came in contact with. Some of the Italians for example, there was a chap Frank (his son used to run a coffee/lunch bar across the road from 869 Albany Highway)<sup>7</sup> he was trained in steelwork. Today you might call him a kind of a blacksmith, but he could do ornamental type steelwork. As a matter of fact in the nineties we had a lot of trouble with people wanting to break into the business. They'd smash our windows and doors and stuff. So I got Frank to design and build a special pair of gates across the front door of the shop and then steelwork that would prevent the people getting in. They could smash the window but they couldn't get in. I had the bars horizontal rather than vertical so that it wasn't so noticeable to people looking at it.

HC You mentioned Esme McAllister – what sort of a person was she, what was she like?

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<sup>7</sup> Frank was in fact Franco Maggi, known as Frank. His son, who ran the coffee/lunch bar, was Livio Maggi.

**McGHEE:** Well to me she was a warm lady, not afraid of hard work. She worked for my father for at least twenty years.

HC And she worked for the newsagents that was there before?

**McGHEE:** Yes. Her husband, whose surname was Arnold, was a soldier and he was in treatment where the Edward Millen Home is today. So I got to know Esme very well, consequently I met her three daughters. As a matter of fact one of her daughters, who was the youngest one, Phyllis, she ended up marrying an American. Anyway about a month before the business completely closed down Phyllis's daughter came to Perth and she talked to me, because her grandmother, Esme, always spoke very well of us. But they came to Perth because they wanted to go to Esme's gravesite at Mundijong - it was a timber mill town - they went to pay respects to it before they went back to America.

HC Was Esme the only staff you had?

**McGHEE:** Well initially yes, but as the business grew we had another lady as well. They were both full-time ladies. Then over time, when we had to, different people came and went, sort of business. I know at one stage we had three full-time ladies working with us. I mentioned me working for Atkins for seven years

HC That was a bit later on wasn't it?

**McGHEE:** Yes, that was a bit later on.

HC Was that when you were at 883 or after you moved up the road?

**McGHEE:** Well I know Esme was with us in the move to 869 from 883. I guess the business was a bit small in size at 883 but because of the build-up in the area from the migrant population that were moving to Vic Park... In that time the whole area was expanding because you had suburbs coming and being built that weren't there before. From East Victoria Park you had St James, you had Bentley, you had Wilson. On the other side you had places like Kewdale and of course, Carlisle. Carlisle was there but it was greatly expanded. Lathlain, Redcliffe - Cannington of course. Some of these suburbs were there before but they were almost semi-rural at one stage.

HC What sort of stock did this shop carry compared with the one over at Mt Lawley?

**McGHEE:** We expanded the range into giftware. You had your magazines. Another thing we used to sell a lot of around November 5<sup>th</sup>, because of Guy Fawkes Night, was fireworks and stuff. We used to sell many cases of fireworks. The fireworks were from China, Australian-made, English-made. They are the ones I distinctly remember and we probably had over 200 different varieties of them. Because of Vic Park becoming a centre for shopping, more so as it grew, because of the expansion going on at the time... I just remember we probably bought, I don't know, eight, ten cases of the

Chinese fireworks. When it came to things like Tom Thumbs and penny bombs and other sorts of crackers like that, we bought them by the case.

HC            You also had Cyclops toys didn't you?

**McGHEE:**    Oh yes.

HC            Tell me about Cyclops toys and what you had to do as a little boy?

**McGHEE:**    Well when I was going to East Victoria Park Primary School, when I came home my dad asked me to put together numbers of Cyclops toys. They could be pull along wagons, they could be three-wheeler tricycles, they could be scooters, prams. There may have been some other Cyclops toys I just can't remember at the moment. I got quite good at putting them together. They used to come in flat packs, a small box or carton and all the bits and pieces were there, but you had to assemble them and put them together. I became quite good at that.

HC            You had a lot more delivery boys at this shop<sup>8</sup> compared with Mount Lawley didn't you?

**McGHEE:**    I think so. We had a full newspaper run<sup>9</sup>. I know my father used to deliver something like about sixteen hundred *West Australians* and that's when it got to its height. Then to cover the same area we had at least six newsboys and then. One of those was also to sell *Daily News* outside the Balmoral Hotel. Consequently over time I had to learn each round. So I was delivering newspapers let's say in Westminster Street, Nottingham Street or Hillview Terrace or in St James – it might be Canny Road or Blechynden Road or even over to Boundary Road and Jarrah Road. Then also I used to push the bike up to Walpole Street where Diesel Motors is today<sup>10</sup>; there was also a workshop there that used to service the trucks that used to go to White Rock Quarries. They were old English Foden trucks. I used to go up there. They probably had a team of guys servicing these trucks.

HC            Why did you have to learn each round?

**McGHEE:**    Well every now and again somebody wouldn't turn up and of course there'd be people wanted their paper and they'd get on the phone and say, "Where's my paper?" And Muggins here, used to have to cycle up there; my father might have even gone out there in his car and delivered it. If somebody didn't turn up, it was me who used to have to go out and do the rounds. So I sold the papers from outside the Balmoral Hotel and then had to also learn about the other rounds as well. Probably at one stage I might have had a paper round for me to deliver for a while, but mostly because I had to learn the rounds because somebody never turned up.

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<sup>8</sup> 883 Albany Highway.

<sup>9</sup> See Attachment Three for map of areas covered by the newspaper rounds for the newsagencies at both locations, but mostly for that at 883 Albany Highway.

<sup>10</sup> 1093-1101 Albany Highway, St James.



HC Do any of those boys from those days stand out in your mind, Rod; any personalities?

**McGHEE:** I know there was one boy that worked for us at the time. He came from the Mosman Children's Homes - at that stage it was run by the Smith Family - who I grew to know quite a bit. I can't remember this boy's name. But there was another boy that I later got to know a lot of about. His name was Peter Jutes. He became someone who I knew I could trust. Later on I got him to look after the shop on a Saturday afternoon. That would give me a little free time to spend as I wanted to. Once a newsagent's business has got a round and a shop you are fairly much tied to the business and you get very little free time. That was one of the reasons why we never really opened on a Sunday; though we might have supplied papers for someone else to sell. At one stage I had different newsboys selling *Sunday Times*, outside the shop on a Sunday. That was at 869 Albany Highway. As a matter of fact - I can't remember the actual boy's name - I remember his father's name and that was Peter Stewart. Later on his sons and daughters were selling *Sunday Times* on the Sunday morning. Peter ran the Christian Centre on the corner of Canterbury Terrace. At that stage the post office had moved out of there and into the shopping centre. Then the property itself was bought by an old Methodist minister. He was also connected with the Perth Building Society. When the Perth Building Society was sold his family shared in quite a large amount of money. From that he bought the premises and he gave the premises to be run by Peter Stewart as an outlet for the people in the area that were jobless. I remember his sister also bought Faversham House in York.

HC With folding the newspapers, you must have had to get up very early in the morning.

**McGHEE:** Get out of bed at three o'clock in the morning or half-past-three or four o'clock, depending on what day it was and whether you had help or no help.

HC Did the whole family get up then?

**McGHEE:** I don't think so, but put it this way, there were times when the machine broke down or something else happened and other members of the family would be woken up to help, in an emergency.

HC Did you have a machine at the first shop, or was that all by hand at the first shop?

**McGHEE:** Well at 883, first off we had to roll newspapers by hand and you rolled them up and bent them like a banana. Then you'd be able to throw them a reasonable distance from the moving vehicle. If you used to be, let's say, in the middle of the road, you could throw a paper over a person's fence quite easily. It was a bit of an art and a bit of a technique of doing it. That was in the days when my father had an Austin A40 Tourer that was soft-top. That started off at 883 and after a few years we bought another model of an Austin which also had a soft top - a slightly larger engine in that.

HC Did that replace the delivery boys then?

**McGHEE:** No. The *Daily News* was done separately. We had newsboys for a long time actually. I think around the nineties some of the newsboys weren't very happy with the commission they were given because the *West Australian* and the *Daily News* didn't offer very much of a commission. They said, "Well if you're not going to pay us more, we're going to do something else." I don't know whether they did much else, but we could only pay the commission that the newspapers allowed us to, because though we got a small commission ourselves it wasn't anything like they wanted to be paid. So eventually we ended up delivering the *Daily News* from the van and that was the job that I ended up with as well as delivering the paper in the morning. At one stage I used to have a person helping me deliver the morning paper and that was useful because then I could spend a bit more time in the shop as well as just resting up where I was, at home. At one stage later on I had a house built with my wife at 77 Esperance Street. Before then I'd married Carol Gobby. She became my wife and mother to my two sons. They were born in South Perth.

Because the business was very demanding I did manage to have the family go away for a few holidays, but I had to train somebody to do the rounds. I'd have to spend at least four weeks training somebody to do the round for me to have two weeks holiday.

HC Delivering with the vehicles, was that mainly when you moved up the street or did you do much of that when you were down at 883?

**McGHEE:** At 883 we delivered the *West Australian* and we had a team of newsboys. At 869 we did that as well, but later on I had someone to deliver the papers for me for a while. Later on I moved the rolling machine from 869 up to my garage at 77 Esperance Street. At the time I had a house built by Matt Brophy, who was connected to the Perth Football Club. We had what today would be regarded as a large block, but it was less than a quarter of an acre. I had a long driveway from the footpath down to where the shed was and I had the rolling machine in there and you could have the vehicle in there where you could put the papers directly from the rolling machine into the car or van. Later on we did go through a few different vans.

HC So you started off by the doing the wrap and the fold and making it like a banana and then the rolling machine took over from that method did it?

**McGHEE:** Yes. The first rolling machine we had which was at 883, used to put a brown strip of paper around it. In the process of rolling the paper the brown paper would be cut and then pushed against a glue type of thing, Clag-type glue<sup>11</sup> in there. Then as time went by the papers got larger, but at 883 the papers were generally a smaller paper. Then when we moved to 869 we used to... we had the rolling machine on a stand of castors, so you could move it around. We used to set the rolling machine up in the doorway of the shop. That was done at 883 and later at 869. When I was at

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<sup>11</sup> An Australian glue made by Bostik.

869 one morning, rolling the papers... I was a little bit late one morning but I saw a guy walking up the road on the other side. He had a parcel under his arm; it looked like a long parcel. I thought to myself at the time, 'that looks a bit suspicious to me'. Anyway he walked up the road, past me – at four o'clock in the morning things were pretty quiet. I had the van on the footpath and as I'd rolled one or two bundles of papers I put them in the van. All the time I was watching him and he was watching me. Anyway this went on for half-an-hour or so and then he disappeared. Later I saw him again, he must have opened the door of this shop and put his hand in and then he went in himself. I thought now maybe there's an alarm there and he probably put his hand in and turned the alarm off. Then I found out later that this long parcel he had in his hand ended up being a type of radiator. He disappeared and then I saw smoke coming from the place.

HC                    Is this the fire in the seventies?

**McGHEE:**        Yes. When I saw the smoke I rang the police, well actually when I saw him going in the premises and I thought there was something going on I rang the police. Then later on I saw the smoke coming out of there, so I rang the police again and told them to get the fire brigade out here, which they did. The building was owned by a chap named Cunningham who I got to know a little bit later on. It operated as a gift shop, but during the week previous to that happening, probably three or four days before, I noticed too much... He evidently was emptying the business of all the giftware in the shop. He left the empty boxes there, but he took the goods. Evidently, according to what was said in the court case he was seen working there, by the staff in Coles New World, because they had an office on top of the main floor of the shop and they were looking down through the window and could see what he was doing. I never knew about any of that. He went to Adelaide and sold these things. Later on again I saw him leave the premises. Another thing too was that in the process of him watching me and me watching him, he came down and bought a newspaper. That was when I could see exactly who he was. I didn't know him but I did get a good look at him. I had to go to the Supreme Court, as a major witness. The police arrested him, but to identify him I had to walk right down Albany Highway in the lunch hour, from Duncan Street down to where Broken Hill Hotel is. In the lunch hour there was quite a few people there on the footpath, coming in out of places and I had to identify him in that walk down the highway, so they didn't make it easy for me. I had to walk up to him and tap him on the arm; no sooner had I done that and the police closed in on him and grabbed him and took him off. He was convicted.

HC                    If we could just finish the wrapping. You mentioned the brown paper strip. It then went to greaseproof paper?

**McGHEE:**        Later on after we were using the brown strip it became necessary for my dad to buy the next model of the wrapping machine which had a larger capacity. We needed that larger capacity, particularly for the weekend papers. At that stage it would have been mainly for the *Sunday Times* and the *Saturday West* to some extent. Then it

was possible to be able to give the newspaper some sort of covering so we had rolls of greaseproof paper, the width of the paper, which completely encompassed it. We used that mostly in the wet months of the year, so that would have been through winter and probably some spring and some autumn; that's when we used this greaseproof paper. That was the first protection of the paper that we had apart from just the brown strip around it. Later on the greaseproof paper was changed to putting plastic around. To put the plastic around the paper involved a new machine. We resisted it for a little while, but it was inevitable that once people knew you could have a newspaper wrapped in plastic that's what they wanted. We put an order in for a machine, but twelve months went by and we still couldn't get one. I suppose at the time every newsagent had to have one. Then I heard from the *West Australian* that they actually had organised to have a... There was evidently two different brands of rolling machine and we ended up having one called a Rotowrap. We got that because the *West Australian* had ordered about twelve or twenty of these machines so that they made sure that newsagents used them. They knew that we'd ordered one from this other crowd, but they still couldn't produce it – the supplier – and so we ended up having the machine that the *West Australian* bought for us. We eventually ended up buying the one that the *West Australian* bought and then we found out that we could roll the papers with it. Now you could roll a small paper, or in latter time, when the newspaper got to three hundred or four hundred sheets of paper, we found that we could roll with this machine by putting your finger in the paper and dividing it so that when you put it in this little pair of forks that you put in.... so we had to put some in the middle of the fork and some under the fork and by doing that we found that we could roll very large papers.

HC            Obviously it was very early morning, at 3 am, what time did the shop actually open?

**McGHEE:**    After doing the round you wanted to have a bit of breakfast and then just close your eyes for a little while. The shop didn't really open until about 8.30 in the morning. That's what we kept doing.

HC            What time would that go through to?

**McGHEE:**    Well we used to close at night-time at seven o'clock. Because we closed at seven o'clock and not six o'clock like a lot of other businesses did at the time, because we sold giftware we had to block off some of the shop with screens or partitions because it was the law of the land. They had inspectors going around to make sure we did it. We just weren't allowed to sell certain lines after six o'clock. It was a bit crazy, looking at it today, but that was the way that they had it. So Dad had to build some screens, wood-framed, with say chicken wire across it or something and put them across each night and then take them down the next morning. I know another section we had as giftware, we had to make a door that went across so when a person wanted giftware, generally they'd go into an area, it was like a shop within a shop. But we used to sell quite a large range of giftware and there were quite a few

suppliers; one of them was a firm called J P Keyes, which I used to buy a lot of stuff from. As a matter of fact I bought my wife's engagement ring from them and they sold watches and jewellery, like rings and stuff. They also imported a lot of stuff, including souvenirs. When the State's 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary came along<sup>12</sup> we used to sell a lot of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary souvenirs; that became quite popular with people – they had the modern black swans on it – the West Australian emblem. We had flags, we had crockery and other sorts of giftware. That was at 869. We sold a bit of giftware at 883, but when we moved to 869 we were able to have a bigger area for it and so that's what we did.<sup>13</sup>

HC With the newspapers, what happened about paying for them?

**McGHEE:** Well we used to send out monthly accounts. A lot of people used to come into the shop and pay their account and some of them would come in and pay their bill weekly or fortnightly. We probably had about 50% of people used to automatically come in and pay for their bill, but there were others that used to wait until they got their account and then they would come in and pay it. At that stage also we used to have a guy – he was a retired pensioner person – he used to go around... We had the round divided up into four and each week he would go and collect from a number of houses in that area, so over the four weeks he would cover the whole round. Now in that era, it was the era where the husband went out to work and the wife stayed home and looked after the young family, but as times went by things changed from that and then it ended up the wife might be home looking after young children, but later on she went out to work and consequently the system started to fall down. I had a few different people doing the collecting by the way; I had one lady doing it too. As a matter of fact I used to work in Atkins with her husband, that was a chap named Wally Beckett, he was actually a transport driver in the Korean War.

HC Rod, why didn't you just put them in the mail, the accounts, post them?

**McGHEE:** Well it was cheaper and more effective for us to put an account with a lackie band around the newspaper. There were times when we had to put an account in the mail, sometimes people had a greater respect for getting an account through the mail than they did with an account wrapped around a newspaper. I am not sure exactly why but that seemed to be the case with certain people.

HC Did you have many bad debts?

**McGHEE:** We did have a few people with bad debts but over time, when you knew you had trouble getting the money out of a person, you'd just never deliver a paper to them again. There was one case of a guy who refused to pay for the paper, but when his daughter came in to interview me – and he was at the time connected with

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<sup>12</sup> The 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the start of European colonisation of Western Australia was in 1979.

<sup>13</sup> See Attachment Four for view of inside McGhee's newsagency at 883 Albany Highway.

Curtin University – I said to Bronwyn<sup>14</sup>, “I am not going to have an interview with this person until her father pays the bill. Anyway the daughter must have put some pressure on the father and he came in and paid the bill. It took him about ten years to do that. He definitely hadn’t forgotten because we reminded him several times. I could tell you more stories about that.

HC           Who actually did the accounts – was it family member or a staff member?

**McGHEE:**   Well to some extent it was both. We had a card system, where the customer had a card and we had a card. The customer’s card was probably a piece of green board divided up so that you could write on there what papers they had and then columns which covered, let’s say, twelve months. It was done in a graph way. The customer had a card the same as we had so they could see (if they wanted to) whether they were ahead or behind or what. There were times when some people wanted to pay six months ahead; a lot of people might pay just what they owed, or some might pay a month ahead, depending on their circumstances I suppose. We found that the card system worked very well against just having a ledger with names and amounts written on it, which we initially started off at 883. But when we were introduced to this card system, we could see there was distinct advantages for us as well as the customer.

HC           While you were at 883, you were going to school weren’t you?

**McGHEE:**   Oh yes, I was going to East Victoria Park Primary School. I spent two years there and then later on went to Kent Street High School. Kent Street High School by the way was one of the few five-year high schools in Perth. You had Midland, Fremantle, Perth Mod – there probably one or two other high schools, but they weren’t too plentiful. At the time Kent Street had 1 600 pupils there. At Kent Street High School there was a row or two of prefab buildings running down between playing fields. Also for the first-year students, the boys, they had an overflow that used the top floor of the Victoria Park Primary School. One of the teachers there was a chap named Fred Chaney. His son was also named Fred and he later became connected with administrations other businesses and stuff. Fred Chaney snr., later on, I think, went to do some administration work in the Northern Territory.<sup>15</sup>

HC           What was East Vic Park Primary School like?

**McGHEE:**   Today it is looked upon as being a much older type brick building, but it had extra wide verandahs. The verandahs I suppose were at least six or seven metres wide. You could, if it became necessary, have a class sitting on the verandah as well as being inside the actual classroom itself. I remember also we used to hold concerts out there and there was a lady by the name of Miss Phillips, who used to hold singing

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<sup>14</sup> Niece.

<sup>15</sup> Fred Chaney snr taught in state schools from 1932. After WW2 he was elected Liberal member for the House of Representatives for the seat of Perth. He was Administrator of the Northern Territory from 1970-73. His son, Fred Chaney jnr, was a barrister and solicitor, a deputy leader of the Liberal Party and a minister in the Fraser Government.

classes. They'd hold concert stuff on the verandah. The verandahs ran down the length of the school. East Vic Park had a separate building for junior primary and then they had the upper primary, which I went to. Prior to that I went to Highgate Primary. So they had two distinct buildings, separated, but they were on the same block.

HC                   What sort of experience was school for you?

**McGHEE:**       Oh mostly happy. I remember that there was one teacher who used to like to throw chalk and dusters around the classroom, particularly if he thought you were not paying attention. Suddenly a duster might go over your head and hit the back wall, or sometimes a piece of chalk might be thrown around. If the teacher felt so inclined he'd grab hold of you and whack you with the ruler on the legs. That sort of thing used to go on, but mostly you never saw that sort of thing. I also remember one teacher – a chap by the name of King actually – I think he was in the South African Army at one stage. He used to walk around the class wearing shoes that used to squeak. Anyway one kid didn't do what he wanted him to do and he got up and said something, which the teacher didn't like, so he chased him around the school yard.

HC                   Before we leave 883, I wondered about the shops around 883 – was there many businesses around 883?

**McGHEE:**       Oh yes there were. Starting from Canterbury Terrace there was the prefab Post Office. Then next to us there was a barber. The other side of us there was a furniture shop called McGlew's. They also had a factory behind. I think the factory was organised by a chap named Tommy Hale. They used to produce some of their furniture there.

HC                   Was the barber also a tobacconist?

**McGHEE:**       Oh definitely, yes. Well cigarettes, tobacco, was sold a fair bit, a lot more than today. Tobacco was sold by what we called plug tobacco, which was a square block of tobacco, probably a bit over a centimetre thick and probably about seventy-five to eighty-five millimetres square. Pipe smokers used to smoke that. They'd cut a piece off with their penknife and stick it in their pipe. I actually had an uncle who used to do that. But then there was the rolling tobacco. Rolling tobacco was both for pipe as well as cigarettes. Then there was the cigarettes that were made here – Michelides<sup>16</sup> - brands like Luxor. Then there were other cigarettes that were bought that were made in the Eastern States like Turf and Capstan for example. Then there were other cigarettes that were imported from England - Senior Service and Players come to mind. There was also some American tobacco and cigarettes – Philip Morris I think was one, Temple Bar was another.

HC                   It sounds like it was quite a vibrant little area down at 883, are there any personalities from down that end of town that stick out in your mind?

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<sup>16</sup> Michelides Tobacco Factory in Northbridge.

**McGHEE:** Across the road from us there was Hullett's Hardware for example<sup>17</sup> and there was a line of shops on the other side of the road. As for personalities well there was just different people from different shops that you knew, you know.

HC Any of your own customers stick out in your mind from down there?

**McGHEE:** Well at 883 I remember just down the road a bit from where we were, on the same side of the road there was an Italian family there that used to run a fruit shop. I am just trying to remember their name.<sup>18</sup> They had a very big thriving business with selling fruit and veg. They were an Italian family. They had a son there who ran a small place, a farm, and ran horses. He was at Byford. Round the corner in Basinghall Street, there was a doctor there, for example, which I later went to. There was quite a number of people who I used to talk to.

HC But none that stand out then? Not to worry.

I think what we might cover now Rod, as we've dealt with your schooling, is what you did when you left school, even though that was after you moved to 869.

**McGHEE:** We moved from 883 to 869. When we were at 869, we hadn't been there very long and I went to Kent Street High School. My sister she actually went to Royal Perth as a trainee nurse and she became a double-certificate nurse. Then my brother, he went to university and stuff. Both my sister and brother had a better education than I did.

HC Why was that, Rod?

**McGHEE:** Well I think the trouble was that when Mum and Dad were establishing the business at 883, it took a few years to build up so that my dad could support someone going to, in my sister's case, she went to Penrhos and my brother, Milton, he went to Wesley College. At that stage I don't think my mum and dad could have afforded to send me to Wesley although they would have liked to have done. Now I look back I would have liked to have gone myself, but at the time the boys I made friends with, they were all going to Kent Street. Kent Street at that stage had a reasonably good name. As a matter of fact one of our Governor-Generals went there.

HC How old were you when you left school?

**McGHEE:** I think I would have been around about fifteen or something like that.

HC Then what did you do?

**McGHEE:** My father encouraged me to look for a job and I saw a job advertised with Atkins WA Ltd in Perth so I went there for an interview and they took me on.

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<sup>17</sup> According to Wise's Post Office Directory of 1949, this was situated at 884 Albany Highway, Victoria Park.

<sup>18</sup> Possibly C Spagnolo, mixed business, at 893 Albany Highway. [Wise's POD, 1949].



HC           What was the position?

**McGHEE:**   Well originally I was to work in the paint store. At that stage they were distributors for Glazebrook Paints, that was when they sold Permaglaze, Tennox and Spread Satin. Spread Satin at the time was a rubber-based paint but you could mix it with water. Previously paints you had to mix with mineral turps so there was quite a few advantages in using Spread Satin.

HC           So you were like a storeman/clerk were you?

**McGHEE:**   Well to some extent yes. You'd get a truck turn up with pallet-loads of stuff and you'd have to take your pallet trolley down there and load stuff onto it and then pack it into the shelving. Then we had orders that you to fill out; some of the orders were quite large. In East Vic Park there was a store up the road called J R Manton and they were quite a large distributor of paint as well as other things. There was Eddys in Canning Highway, South Perth. There were many others. There were some orders that went to places like Broome and other country places. I learnt quite a bit about paint at that time.

HC           Was there never talk about you going into the newsagency when you left school?

**McGHEE:**   Well not too much at the time. I think my parents were watching me quite closely and just seeing what sort of person I'd turn out to be, I suppose. I think of us three kids, I was the one that went and did things more. You used to ride your bike over to Como and jump off the jetty there and have a swim in the river. I remember at one stage riding my bike out to Kelmscott. I had a fairly adventurous spirit so that's what I did.

HC           Was there maybe no opening in the newsagency that you could have slotted into when you left school at fifteen?

**McGHEE:**   Well there may have been to some extent, but my father thought I'd be better to go and work for a proper business firm and learn some of the things from them because he felt I would learn more. When somebody told you something, especially if it was another person in charge of the business, you would take more notice. When I was with Atkins I went from the paint department on to the tool department which was connected with the mechanical department, where you had to learn about abrasives, driving wheels, packing, belting (that was used by the timber mills). In the tools you had to learn all about different threads, all sorts of bolts. They may be Whitworth or BSF or metric. Then there are some other things that were left-hand threads. Then there was the cycle threads. All of this I had to learn as I went. Apart from being in the store for a while and doing things I also went into the section office and took phone orders and wrote out orders for the mechanical department, by hand and send that on to the typist. You had to order enough stock to last whatever it was for at least three or four months. There was a turnover of at least three or four

times a year of the stock. The owner of the business was a family by the name of Nathan, which we saw but not very often.

HC That sounds a very interesting job – was it good training in hindsight, for taking over the newsagency – was there anything special that you learnt there that was useful to you when you took over the newsagency?

**McGHEE:** Well I guess one of the main things was to learn the turnover of stock because that comes back to cash flow. So it was important to order enough, but don't overdo it. So you ordered the stuff that you knew that you could sell, or you had orders for. I also, in that same section, I also used to work beside a chap named John Nagle. He used to do most of the tool ordering.

HC How long were you down at 883, in total, how many years?

**McGHEE:** Six or seven years at least. I am not actually certain of the length of time we were there.

HC It had been called Keatings Newsagency. When did your dad took over, did it then become McGhees?

**McGHEE:** Yes, we established it as McGhees. Keating owned the business, but he gave it to... I think it might have been his son-in-law and his name was Hollier. He had been a schoolteacher.

HC But it was still called Keatings, wasn't it? <sup>19</sup>

**McGHEE:** Well it might have been on paper, but I think the customers knew it was Hollier, but I'm not too sure what the actual business was called.

HC Things sounded as though they were going really well, what made your dad decide to come and move up the street to 869?<sup>20</sup>

**McGHEE:** Well for one thing he wanted to own the premises that we had the business on. He didn't particularly like having to pay rent. So when the opportunity came to buy the land Dad sort of jumped at it. Originally the block of land at 869 Albany Highway had an old house on it. The house straddled what would be two blocks today but in that time it was considered as one block. The block was subdivided and so we bought one half and the Commonwealth Bank bought the other half. I think the Commonwealth Bank at the time wanted to be sure that whoever they sold the other half to wanted to be a business that would attract people, so it helped the bank itself as well. They must have liked the idea of having a newsagency beside them because we were centre for people to come and buy the newspaper, but many other things as

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<sup>19</sup> See entry for 883 Albany Highway in Wise's Post Office Directory 1949.

<sup>20</sup> According to Mr McGhee the family ran the newsagency at 883 Albany Highway for about five years, purchasing the block of land at 869 in 'around 1957'. <https://www.pfr.com.au/vic-park-locals-rodney-mcghee/>

well. So we attracted people in our own right but at the same time people used to go to the bank to get their pension, for example. In us purchasing the land Dad had an agreement with the Commonwealth Bank to put in the deeds our two passageways together. In other words when you have a building you had to have right of way so that you can get from one end of the block to the other. It made sense to put the bank's right of way and our right of way together and save having a drop, making a driveway, that we could have parking behind. Dad had to sort of lobby the bank about that. He succeeded and so we could have a shed down at the back of the property and you could put your vehicle in the shed and maybe use the shed for other things as well. We had a double shed at the back at the time and then the bank simply chose to have a vacant open-air area at the back, where they could park their vehicles. Initially the bank was smaller and then later on they expanded it. Our business was expanding as well and then we had a basement built in the shop. As the years went by we needed more storage and so also expanded the basement. The basement became virtually about two-thirds the size of the shop. We had to dig underneath the... It had to be at least six feet from each side of the foundations, at the front and both sides. The basement was quite large – it became quite large – so there was a lot of soil removed. We found it quite necessary at the time because Vic Park and East Vic Park became quite a centre for shops and selling stuff. People like John Hughes will tell you that. [Laughs]

HC                    How long had you been there when you extended the basement, very long?

**McGHEE:**        Probably about ten years.

HC                    Getting onto the new building is such a big subject I think we might leave that for next time.

## **END OF FIRST INTERVIEW SESSION**

## SECOND INTERVIEW SESSION

HC This the second interview session with Rod McGee for the Town of Victoria Park, held at his home in Lockridge on Tuesday 6 February 2018. The interviewer is Heather Campbell.

Rod, last time I should have asked you about what your mother's role was in running the newsagency.

**McGHEE:** We had female staff, so she helped the female staff. That was prior to them building a house up at 10 Bone Street, St James. My mother sort of retired up there and she continued on with her oil painting and things like that.

HC Did she actually serve in the shop?

**McGHEE:** In years gone by. She definitely did at 883 Albany Highway. Then when the shop was built at 869 she certainly would have helped. It was all hands on deck at times. When we first moved to 869 Albany Highway we had at least two full-time staff and then we had another lady that used to work part-time as well. We had another lady that used to come in on Saturdays for example, and she helped out as well. She probably would have been there roughly from about nine until one o'clock.

HC While we are talking about staff, are there any staff from 869 that stand out in your mind. We talked about the staff at the other at 883, but what about the staff at 869?

**McGHEE:** Well one certainly does and that was Esme McAllister, who later became Esme Arnold.

HC Now Esme worked with you at the first shop didn't she?

**McGHEE:** And she also worked at the second shop. Esme also worked for the previous owner, a chap named Hollier. Her husband was an ex-Second World War soldier, who I met a few times at the Edward Millen Home. I mentioned to you that I used to walk around the verandahs and sell *Sunday Times*.

HC Yes, you told me that last time and I think we talked about Esme quite a lot last time. What about Lois?

**McGHEE:** Well.... [Long pause]. See there was another lady that I had and then Lois worked with her, Betty Barrett. She is now living in South Australia.

HC And what was Betty like?

**McGHEE:** I found Betty to be very helpful to me. She used to work for Coles when they had the old style of Coles stores. I think she was manageress of the Fremantle store and manageress of another store – I can't remember quite which one it was.

HC But what did she do for you?

**McGHEE:** She worked in the shop, as a shop assistant, but she also helped me a little bit with some of my paperwork, with keeping track of invoices and things like that. For example, we wrote down the month's invoices in a journal, or ledger, or something. Then when we got the monthly accounts we could go through and double check them. It was things like that that Betty helped me with.

HC What about Lois, what sort of things did she do in the shop?

**McGHEE:** Well a lot of it was general work in meeting the customer and selling them stuff. Of course there was a lot of things like unpacking goods and pricing them and that type of thing. Just a lot of general shop work, you know.

HC Was there any members of the more extended family that used to help out in the shop?

**McGHEE:** Well my sister at one stage used to help me a little bit when she was at home. My sister became a trained nurse at Royal Perth Hospital. Her husband-to-be lived at Williams and she worked at a hospital fairly close to there. It probably was Narrogin.

HC What sort of things did she do when she was helping you?

**McGHEE:** If and when she was home it would be watching the shop and serving customers so my mum and dad and probably myself, at the time, could have a meal, and then go back in the shop later.

HC I read somewhere that learning the till was like a 'rite of passage' – how did you teach people the till Rod?

**McGHEE:** I guess a lot of people weren't used to operating the till. The till we had, the old one initially, it was just a case of pushing the keys down and pressing a total button. As time went by the till became more electronic and you would have to do certain things so that you could put in the sale and also then you could put in the amount of money that they were giving you and then press the button and the till would open and then it would tell you how much change you had to give. That type of thing.

HC Did it always balance at the end of the day?

**McGHEE:** Oh closely! [Laughter] There's always mistakes that happened. Then sometimes you might have to take some money out to pay for a cash payment you might have to give somebody, or a credit, all sorts of things like that.

HC Did you roster staff - were they rostered; how did you work out who came on what day?

**McGHEE:** See initially the full-time staff would have been there like, let's say five days a week from nine o'clock till five o'clock. For one thing I would become available in the shop late afternoon and then would be there until seven o'clock at night. I always did the late shift. Now and again you might have a few bodies around at night that would give you trouble, so I used to be around, just to make sure they didn't. But generally things were pretty safe in those days.

HC Any problems with theft?

**McGHEE:** I think you always have certain problems but you got to know who you had to watch and who you didn't. Sometimes we would give one person – it might have been Lois or one of the others – a tap on the shoulder and say, "Watch that person will you?" You pick up a lot of things by watching people's body language. That's the sort of thing that you did.

HC You mentioned before we started recording the honesty boxes, tell me about the honesty boxes.

**McGHEE:** Well you see Monday to Saturday you had the honesty box you put out the front of the shop while you were getting ready to do the round. So you did the round, but while you were away and before the shop opened you had a special box out the front where people could put their coins and then took a paper. That was out the front from probably – let's say from four o'clock in the morning until when we opened up. That was the honesty box that was provided by the West Australian Newspapers; we had to chain it to a wall in case somebody took off with it. On Saturday night we also had these two large – what used to be a clothes locker, converted to hold newspapers, with a chute going down the side and underneath where the coins used to go. Then of course over the week we had to count all those coins and bank them. It used to take quite a while to count all that by the way.

HC Were most people honest?

**McGHEE:** Well we found most people certainly were; there was always one or two that weren't. As time went by less people became honest, so it then became not worthwhile having the box put out on the street on a Saturday night. Then a couple of young boys wanted to be newsboys and so I got them to sell the *Sunday Times* out the front on a Saturday night. They were there pretty much until midnight. That worked fairly well, we used to sell quite a few *Sunday Times* on a Saturday night.

HC At both shops?

**McGHEE:** More from 869 because at 883 people weren't into the business of having somebody outside selling papers. I also did have a newsboy out the front on Sunday mornings with a flat-top trolley with papers on. He would sell the weekend papers which included the *Sunday Times*.

HC Now you mentioned also before we started recording about the birdcage at 869, tell me about the birdcage.

**McGHEE:** Well the birdcage was an area, probably about the size of a small room. It had glass shelving around it and it had giftware in it. Somebody gave it the name of 'birdcage' and it stuck. We used to carry quite a large range of giftware and then we could pull the door across at six o'clock so that that whole area then was locked off, so you couldn't as easily get in there and sell some giftware.

HC So was it illegal to sell giftware after six o'clock?

**McGHEE:** Well it was at the time. Before we had the birdcage and certainly other areas in the shop, we had to put screens across – it was a wooden frame with chicken wire across it and padlocked. They used to have inspectors that used to come around and see that you complied with all this. It was a real nuisance I might add, but still it was something we had to do.

HC Did you ever get caught out?

**McGHEE:** Oh I think we might have been given a couple of warnings here and there, but mostly we complied. It was annoying having to do this at six o'clock every night.

HC What was the logic behind that?

**McGHEE:** Well it was supposed to be protecting the larger stores. Sometimes you question the logic of it all because it might be an alarm clock, or it might be some other thing... But, of course, the pressure was put on you when it came to the approach to Mothers' Day and approach to Christmas and things like that.

HC Last time we mentioned how your dad came to buy the block with the bank, up at 869, but we didn't talk about the design of the accommodation and who built it. You would have been in your early teens I think, when you moved up there.

**McGHEE:** I was going to Kent Street High School at the time.

HC So you would have been a teenager. Who designed the building because it was purpose-built as a newsagency wasn't it?

**McGHEE:** Yes. Well I had a, let's say, a distant nephew, who was... He was a carpenter but he also was doing housing as well. As time went by he was able to do more commercial shops and buildings. Originally he was just simply a builder for what you might call cottage buildings, which is just houses.

I think a lot of it was designed by my father. A shop in a lot of ways is quite a lot simpler in design to what a house might be, because you just sort of have the four walls, but there was also a back entrance from the shop into the house behind.<sup>21</sup>

HC            So a house was designed as well then?

**McGHEE:**    That's right, yes.

HC            What was the house like, what was layout of it?

**McGHEE:**    Pretty much a four-bedroomed house. One of those bedrooms was used by my grandmother initially – that's Hannah McGee. She got sick with asthma. Initially they lived in Mount Magnet and because of dust storms they had to come back down to Perth, but my grandmother had this asthma and every now and again she would have to have fine tubes put down her nose with oxygen to overcome her breathing.

HC            So living in that house was your mum and dad, you and your grandma – what about your brother and sister?

**McGHEE:**    Like I said to you it was virtually a four-bedroomed place, so I and my brother would have been in one bedroom and my sister would have been in another one and my mum and dad would have been in their own bedroom.

HC            What was the set-up joining the house to the shop?

**McGHEE:**    Well it was just a case of walking through one door and then walking down some stairs into the shop. There was also a bit of a fall on the land so the house was actually on soil that was higher than the shop was. I mentioned to you at one stage there was a driveway between the two blocks, which was the Commonwealth Bank built on one half and we built on the other half. Just as we expanded the Commonwealth Bank also expanded their building as well.

HC            I think the name of the builder who was your cousin, your second or third cousin, was Jack Ewer[Sp?] wasn't it?

**McGHEE:**    That's right. He helped design and with the building of the first section. There was another builder who built the expansion. The house became two-storey and the shop went back into... I do know a name, but I just can't remember it now. He was a licensed builder. The first builder who helped build 869 was a chap named Stewart. He also lived at the top of Westminster Street. A lot of the people that you got to do jobs like building and the like, because we were a newsagency and in touch with a lot of people because of the newspapers, we knew a lot of these people who were builders and stuff. So when it came to getting a quote you knew who you could trust and who you had to watch more closely.

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<sup>21</sup> See Attachment Five for view of the building of the newsagency, c. late fifties, early sixties.



HC Now you talked of the house having two-storeys eventually – when it was first built did it just have one storey?

**McGHEE:** It was just one level, yes.

HC How long did that original design remain?

**McGHEE:** Probably about ten or fifteen years.

HC When that was changed and the second storey was put on the house, was that also when the basement was extended?

**McGHEE:** It would have been, yes. While that was all happening mum and dad rented a house up in Canterbury Terrace.

HC And how long did your mum and dad stay living there before you took over?

**McGHEE:** Somewhere around another ten years. At that stage my mum and dad wanted to go away on a holiday to Europe, so I came into the business more fully.

HC But you already had a job, so what happened?

**McGHEE:** I was working for Atkins Carlyle at the time. I left Atkins – I worked for Atkins for seven years by the way. I knew a lot about the newsagency business but I still needed to get more hands-on running the business myself with my father perhaps, looking over my shoulder and guiding me here and there. When I was running the business myself I was also doing all the buying. That meant, at Christmas time for example, I would go into a toy importer place and one that comes to mind is Brian Shindy[Sp?] and I'd probably spend two half days there just going through looking at the toys and deciding which ones I wanted and which ones I didn't. I'd look at how good that particular toy was and what it was designed and so on. That's the sort of thing I did. To me it wasn't a case of just looking at ones on the shelf and saying, "I'll have that, that, that and that," I'd pick up and examine the jolly thing.

HC So did you sort of serve an apprenticeship with your dad before you took over, what was the set-up?

**McGHEE:** Well I suppose you could call that twelve months before he left an apprenticeship of sorts. I had to know the newspaper round backwards which meant I had to know the *West Australian* round, I had to know the *Sunday Times* round. I had to know each one of the *Daily News* boy rounds. There were so many different areas that I had to get to know more of. In giftware, for example, I had to come to grips ordering giftware. There was a firm in Perth called J P Keyes and I used to get a lot of giftware from them. There were other areas as well, other suppliers that I had to get to know as well. I guess we probably had giftware at least from – I don't know – six or ten different suppliers. Each supplier had their strengths and of course you look at their

strengths before you did anything else and you got to know more of that sort of thing. In J P Keyes I got to know... They used to have quite a good range of glassware and giftware and general stuff, but they also had a very good lot of souvenir type stuff. That became pretty prominent when it came to Western Australia's 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary<sup>22</sup>. In souvenirs there was a big range of linen-ware, for example, but there would also be more general items – it could be hats, it could be flags, it could be chinaware, like coffee mugs.

HC A lot to learn Rod.

**McGHEE:** All sorts of things.

HC At the end of that twelve months, when your mum and dad went on their trip did you feel confident that you could manage?

**McGHEE:** To a large extent I did, yes. It was a case of sink or swim a bit.

HC Were you living at the house then?

**McGHEE:** Yes, I was living at the house then. When Mum and Dad got back I then became a little bit involved with the Easter Camp Movement, where I met my future wife. I had arranged to go with a minister down to Esperance but the chap who was driving the car at the time, going down the Bunbury highway, he overtook another vehicle and he was a bit blasé because he was going down that road almost every week. But out of a dip came a car on the other side of the road. We hit this other car side on. At the time we picked up a passenger, he was a trainee RAAF cadet. The side back door of the vehicle all got sheared off and then the poor bloke got thrown under the car, onto the road; he landed on his face I believe. I think he was in hospital for two or three months.

HC So did you meet your wife on that trip, is that what you're saying?

**McGHEE:** I met my wife... See when I had this accident, instead of going to Esperance I was a bit shaken up and bruised, but I didn't feel I wanted to go home. So there was another vehicle that was coming down and I was at a minister's house in Pinjarra; then I met up with this other vehicle, picked up from Pinjarra and we went to Bridgetown. I met my future wife at that particular camp.

HC Is this Carol?

**McGHEE:** This is Carol, yes.

HC Where did you and Carol live after you were married, did you live in the house behind the shop?

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<sup>22</sup> In 1979.

**McGHEE:** Well when we first got married Carol's father had a beach house at Watermans and we lived there for probably a month or two. I'd have to leave there to go and do the newspaper run of a morning. But later I was looking to buy a block of land that we could build on. A chap came into the shop, who I sort of half knew and he lived in Esperance Street, but he was selling a block of land down the bottom of Esperance Street. As the blocks were sold, the blocks of land were being subdivided and the road would go further down the hill. He came in to sell me this block of land and I thought well this is an ideal place for me, so I bought the block of land and later we built on it. A chap by the name of Matt Brophy, was the builder. He was connected to the Perth Football Club. I didn't pick the lowest quote, but I picked the next one up.

HC Did Carol work in the shop from then on?

**McGHEE:** Carol never actually worked in the shop. Carol was a shorthand typist in a typing pool, that worked for the Commissioner of Police. So Carol had to interview different police who had a court case coming up and then she would have to write the script down in preparation for the court case. She was one of about four or five typists that worked in this typing pool.

HC Who was living in the shop house then, was it still your mum and dad at that time?

**McGHEE:** Well Mum and Dad, they were initially and then... I knew that Mum wanted to retire and live away from the shop. So I said to Dad, "It's about time you built a house for Mum." There was a spare block of land in Bone Street, St James. So Dad had the house built there. Jack Ewer[Sp?], who was a builder at the time, for a South Australian firm, he, with my father, had the house built at 10 Bone Street, St James. Then the house behind the shop was vacant for a bit on twelve months I suppose. At that stage my wife didn't like being married to a newsagent, so I had to face divorce proceedings and I had to move out of 77 Esperance Street, I actually then lived behind the shop. I wasn't happy about it, but that was the reality of it all.

HC When you had a second storey put on the top of the house, what did you have up on that second storey?

**McGHEE:** There would have been three bedrooms, a shower.

HC In addition to the bedrooms that were there when it started?

**McGHEE:** Well see, one of the bedrooms became a kitchen and one of the bedrooms became like a lounge room type of thing. Through the whole time there was a laundry at the back. You had to go down a side passage and then there'd be a laundry there so you could have your washing machine in it and all that type of thing.

HC What was the building made of?

**McGHEE:** It was double brick. The ground floor was double-brick, but the floor above it was single brick. That was a lot to do with the strength of the foundations.

HC And what was the roof?

**McGHEE:** Asbestos.

HC Did that give you problems?

**McGHEE:** It didn't to start off with, but as time went by it certainly became a problem. As you probably know, asbestos today is a real no-no, but initially it was chosen because... well it didn't rust for one thing and it was always fairly solid and it was probably a stronger roof than other materials at the time, including like an iron roof for example.

HC What sort of facilities did you have; did you have a telephone for example?

**McGHEE:** The telephone... well the telephone was the same one as for the shop, but it had an extended line through to the back of the shop. Initially the phone number was N and three other numbers behind it and over time the phone number had barely changed. It might have had another digit put in front of it, but it was a very old line.

HC The first shop, did that have a telephone?

**McGHEE:** Oh yes, yes. I think we retained the same phone number.

HC What was it like as a building to maintain over the years – did you have any maintenance problems?

**McGHEE:** At 869?

HC Yes.

**McGHEE:** Structurally the building at 869 was very sound. For example the walls inside the shop as well as the house weren't plaster, they were what we called 'sand finish', which means if you bump the wall a sand finish wall is twice as strong as a plaster wall. If you hit with your hand well you'd probably take a bit of skin off yourself. Before you painted it you had to get a block of wood and run down the wall to remove the loose sand on it. Then you'd have to put a primer coat on and then at least two to three coats of, in this case it was a plastic rubber paint, called Spread Satin.

HC Did you paint the inside yourself?

**McGHEE:** Oh we had the painter who did the job but I... See when I worked for Atkins I learned a lot about paint. That meant when it came to being quoted on a paint, with paint you couldn't pull the wool over my eyes because I knew exactly what was wanted. We painted the inside building with this Spread Satin. Now Spread Satin was

a rubber-based type paint, which is similar to a plastic paint today, so in other words it was water-based, that's how you would probably know it today. You would probably thin the paint down initially and put on a primer coat and that would act as a seal coat and then you would at least two coats of paint on after that. Now when that was done correctly that paint job on that wall would last for decades. In fact on the walls of 869, it did.

HC I think that probably covers the building – let's talk about the stock. You said about some of the newspapers you sold, the *West Australian* and the *Sunday Times* and the *Daily News*, but what other papers did you sell?

**McGHEE:** Well I remember there being a Dutch paper, there was a German paper. There were some other papers like Chinese, for example, but we didn't get involved with those. With the magazines and the newspapers, they were pretty much all supplied by different newspaper distributors. You had newspapers from the *West Australian* and the *Sunday Times* and then you had magazines that were supplied from about three major magazine suppliers – one or two of those don't exist now. Then there were some other magazines that came to... I don't know whether you've ever heard of a magazine called *Burda*. If you were, let's say, a dressmaker and you could design your own clothing, you could get patterns out of this magazine, they were German by origin, but they would be at least in advance of the fashions that would hit Perth. If you were good at fashion and making your own clothes that would be one magazine that you might look at.

HC What other magazines did you stock?

**McGHEE:** Oh well the full range of all the women's magazines. There were scientific ones, magazines to do with gardening and home renovation. There was, of course, car magazines.

HC Did you get those from individual suppliers or was there one stockist that stocked those?

**McGHEE:** Well it was mostly stockists and about three other magazine suppliers. Network was one, then Gordon and Gotch. There was another magazine supplier but I just can't think of it off the top of my head at the moment. There just wasn't a call for a lot of those. Mostly they were imported magazines – they might have been in German or Italian.

HC What was the most popular magazine?

**McGHEE:** Undoubtedly it was the *Australian Women's Weekly* at the time – *Women's Day*, *New Idea* – they were pretty much the main magazines at the time. There was also *TV Week* for example but when the newspapers – in this case the *Saturday West* and the *Sunday Times*, produced their own TV magazine, for that reason the *TV Week* – we sold one or two of them, but there never was a great sale of them.

If you bought the weekend paper you didn't really need a TV magazine, because you had it in the newspapers. That was done by the newspaper world to keep the interest in people buying the weekend papers. It was one of the major things. If you were selling papers today, particularly weekend ones, one of the first thing a person looks at in the paper, is seeing if their TV magazine is there.

HC Which of the newspapers did you have delivered to people's homes?

**McGHEE:** Well pretty much all of them. Another newspaper that came along was the *Sunday Independent*. That was initially owned by one of the mining people by the name of Wright.

HC But I don't think it had a great deal of success did it?

**McGHEE:** It was successful to a point, but the trouble is that when you're producing a newspaper there's a hell of a lot that goes into that paper in all manner of ways. You have to sell a lot of papers to make that paper worthwhile. Another paper we used to sell of course, was the *Daily News*.

HC Were there any of those papers that you didn't sell sufficient numbers of to make them not worthwhile?

**McGHEE:** Well the *Sunday Independent* was one of those. Mind you a newsagent never got a huge amount of commission out of it; it was only by the numbers of papers that we sold that made it worthwhile to a point. But it was also the thing that because we distributed newspapers it also brought a lot of people to our shop, which we sold other things to.

HC I believe you had a flat-topped trolley for selling the *Sunday Times*, tell me about that.

**McGHEE:** Well the flat-topped trolley was a trolley that you could put six flat papers side-by-side down on there. I actually designed the trolley myself at the time. It had a section with a handle that you could pull and then it had another... a U-shaped piece behind. It was made of solid steel. Then it had the wheels underneath of it. The side wheels were made so they went in line with each other, but the wheels on the end, they could turn and so you could go around a corner with them. I guess the whole thing is that you could put on that trolley as many papers as you could stack up on it, which would mean probably half a ton at least.

HC Where did you put them then – where did you put the trolley?

**McGHEE:** Oh we had a shed at the rear of the property at the time. We had a double garage at the back. We also had a couple of hand trolleys as well, so I could probably put at least six or eight bundles of papers on there. At the foot of the hand-trolley, I had a wire plate, roughly about the size of, let's say, A3 which is twice the size

of A4. I could probably put four bundles of papers on and then a row of papers up on top of that.

HC So did you then wheel the trolleys outside so people could help themselves by the honour system?

**McGHEE:** It would only be when we put the flat-top trolley out on the street footpath, mainly of a Sunday, so that people could... I had a newsboy selling papers from there. We would probably put six or eight bundles of *Sunday Times* on there, to sell, on the footpath out the front. So the trolley got used for that, for moving bulk amounts of papers, as well as other things. We used to get truckloads of stationery for example and especially with the build up to back-to-school time. We could wheel that trolley down the driveway and then they'd load what was on the truck onto this flat-top trolley and take it around to the shed at the back.<sup>23</sup>

HC Were the newsboys that worked for you at 869 the same boys that you had had before?

**McGHEE:** Oh well they did move at the time, but sometimes you'd get somebody who'd worked with you for six months, sometimes twelve months, maybe a couple of years, but there was a constant change of boys over that time.

HC Was it a trouble getting boys?

**McGHEE:** Initially no, in fact we often had a waiting list. As time went by things changed a bit and then it became difficult to retain somebody. I then had to go out and deliver the papers from the van; especially on the weekends that was the case.

HC You'd throw them from the van?

**McGHEE:** Yes, yes.

HC What was your throwing technique like, was there a special way to do it?

**McGHEE:** Oh well at that stage of the game, as far as the *Daily News* was concerned, or the *Weekend News*, we used to hand roll them and put an elastic band around them. Sometimes we actually used to put the papers through the rolling machine, which at that stage used to put a brown strip of paper around them. But I guess it was a bit of an art I suppose, throwing papers from the van, but I became pretty good at it.

HC Did the paper boys get phased out then, when you started the van delivery?

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<sup>23</sup> See Attachment Five for external view of 869 Albany Highway, with newspapers, c. 1990.

**McGHEE:** Oh I think they phased themselves out. The whole thing is they weren't getting enough, I guess, to what they expected to get. It then became to a stage where one or more might get a job at Golden Arches<sup>24</sup> or something like that.

HC So that's the newspapers, let's talk about some of the other stock you carried? There was a blogger on the internet, a man called Nathan Hobby<sup>25</sup>, he said the shop was 'crammed with stock that could have been decades old, but it was exactly what somebody was looking for'. I know from having been there that was the most amazing shop. There were comics too, as well as the magazines and newspapers – comics like *The Phantom* and *Batman*?

**McGHEE:** Oh well yes – *The Phantom*, for example, was probably one of the oldest comics... They're still being produced today. I think it had a different author to what the original ones were, when they might have been sold for a shilling or something like that. Quite different today. We used to sell a bit of sporting equipment like Burley footballs for example. The Burley factory, for example, was in East Perth.

HC Did you get them factory direct, Rod?

**McGHEE:** Yes. I always went direct where I possibly could. Originally when the Burley football... It had a sort of a piece that came up and you had to sort of bend it over and put an elastic band around it to keep the air in and poke it under the leather part of the football. That was like that for quite a number of years and you had to get fairly good at lacing a football up and all that type of thing. I had a couple of special tools for lacing and pumping up. Later on they put a special valve in it the idea was to dip the needle into some - what we were told at the time - was some neatsfoot oil – today people maybe just use vegetable oil or sometimes just stick it in on your tongue. Today there's just not footballs that are like that, there's basketballs and all that type of thing.

HC You made quite a feature of selling school books, didn't you, how did you go about that?

**McGHEE:** Well we sold a lot of school books, school stationery and we used to feature that in a big way. I used to go around to the schools around us - and that would probably be about six or eight different schools around us - and ask to get their school lists. They became used to me going around and asking for their school lists. Then I could see exactly what was wanted on their lists. Initially a lot of school books were produced in Perth by a firm by the name of Carrolls. They had a factory, a printing press, out in Welshpool. We used to stock those, but I couldn't buy those direct or if I did I'd get the same discount as I would if I went to another couple of outlets. One was

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<sup>24</sup> Referring to McDonalds. The arches were incorporated into the chain's logo in 1962 and the current Golden Arches logo, introduced in 1968, resembles an 'M' for McDonalds.

<sup>25</sup> Mr Hobby described the newsagency as 'one Roald Dahl might have invented, crammed with stock that could be decades old but exactly what someone was looking for'

<https://nathanhobby.com/2017/03/05/closing-down-a-walk-along-albany-highway/>



E S Wigg and Son and then there was Carrolls and then there was another supplier, I can't quite think of it now. But gradually more Eastern States book publishers became more involved with Western Australia.

HC But were there no bookshops selling things like that?

**McGHEE:** Well there were. I think in the city there could have been other bookshops selling supplies, but we never had the competition like you... Well competition was different then than it is today. I think initially newsagents were a lot more involved in school supplies than they are today. I think today it's not that they can't do it, except that they can't always match the price and also it's the TV advertising etc., that goes on.

HC What about things like reams of paper and art supplies and things like that, more the stationery items – envelopes?

**McGHEE:** I used to carry a full range of envelopes, whether it was metric or imperial. Initially people used quarto or foolscap and later on when metric supplies came in – that was around about '63 or something – there were things like American quarto, which incidentally was... The imperial quarto was 10 x 8 inches but the metric quarto was 10½ x 8⅛, or something, from memory. So according to how you folded the sheet of paper – like initially normal writing pads, they were 10 inches x 8 inches. That was the old imperial quarto. But later, as things went more metric, some people still used some of the old imperial sizes of envelopes. One that is still used today is what we called 11B, but that was made so that if you folded the 10 x 8-inch quarto it fed into that envelope. If you folded A4 paper today you should use what we call a 12¾ envelope, which is slightly longer than the 11B one. If I had a piece of paper I could illustrate how to do it.

HC Did you learn all this on the job?

**McGHEE:** Oh yes, yes.

HC Where did you source the envelopes and the paper

**McGHEE:** Well like I said to you I tried to go direct wherever I could. Initially I used to go to some paper merchants and buy my paper, but it meant you had to buy it by the pallet load. In other words in a pallet there would at least a ton of paper. There was a paper supplier over in Osborne Park and then Spicers out here in Cannington and there were one or two others as well. I got to know all that there was to know about paper to a large extent and depending on how thick it was... the old English way of measuring paper was sizes and it was also done in... the weight of it was in pounds – the Americans by the way still do it that way. But the metric measure was gsms, which was grams per square metre.

HC So did you sell other items of stationery like pencils and pens and rubbers?

**McGHEE:** Oh hundreds of them!

HC Where did you get those from?

**McGHEE:** Oh, because I always tried to go direct to the main source... I used to go through a newsagents' supplier, but I also used to go direct to Faber Castell, Staedtler and Jasco. If you were supplying a lot of stationery to schools it meant that you also were buying reasonable quantities of it and you had to buy reasonable quantities of it to be able to buy it direct from the main source, which in this case was Faber Castell, Staedtler, Jasco; there were one or two others I used to be involved with.

HC So was it the local businesses in Vic Park that used to come and buy the office supplies from you, who were your customers for that sort of thing?

**McGHEE:** Well for example I used to supply a lot of stationery to the Quokka Newspaper people. Now Quokka set themselves up in East Vic Park as their main office, so people would ring them on the phone or put through a fax to them. To the Quokka people, which was owned by the McCabe family at the time, I used to supply fax paper by the cartons and rolls and I used to supply them with all their envelopes and general stationery and copy paper. I often used to go across the road with my hand trolley with maybe a dozen cartons of copy paper at a time and cart it up to the upstairs office.

HC It must have had some impact on you when businesses like Officeworks opened then.

**McGHEE:** Well it certainly did. Initially they aimed at several areas, but one was the electronic side but there was also the bulk paper side. Initially I could kind of compete a little bit but the trouble is that when they start selling stuff at your cost of below your cost it meant that you still have make a living out of what you were selling. Over time it became less viable in selling bulk amounts of paper.

HC What about art supplies, brushes and special paper and things like that – paint?

**McGHEE:** Well one of the suppliers I had was a firm in the Eastern States I used to see roughly about once a year. Their art supplies and some stationery was generally in the lower-priced area. So I used to sell and buy all sorts of special brushes, for example. I'd buy special sorts of papers, it could be paper that's made from cloth, paper that's treated so you can put oil paint straight onto it. There was special heavy wood-pulp type paper, paper that had a mixture of wood-pulp and cloth. Then there was paper that was actually entirely made from cloth.

HC Who would buy that, Rod?

**McGHEE:** Generally people came to us mainly because the art supplies... because I always carried the lower priced stuff. It was art supplies that was on a list that might

be produced for someone in Curtin University – it might be somebody from Penrhos or MLC.

HC So it was educational places and things like that.

**McGHEE:** Education colleges and the like, yes, Wesley College was another one.

HC What about fireworks, did you sell them?

**McGHEE:** Fireworks – we made quite a big occasion of it. We used to carry something like about two hundred different varieties of fireworks; they could be sky rockets, they could be English fireworks, showers and then an explosion that sent a shower into the air. There were a lot of Chinese fireworks. It could be things like Tom Thumbs, or penny bombs (as we used to call them). A pretty wide variety of bombs and Chinese fireworks at the time.

HC Where did you get those from?

**McGHEE:** Well there were a number of different suppliers. Some of the English fireworks we used to get from Gordon and Gotch, for example. Then there was other Chinese fireworks we got from a crowd called McAlindens<sup>26</sup>.

HC You probably started off using the same suppliers as your dad, did you then branch out and try and get a better deal elsewhere?

**McGHEE:** Well I did with stationery. For example one of the firms I'd got quite a variety of stationery from was a place called Marbig. You probably may know the name. They started getting into files – they were always imported files but they were cheaper than an Australian-made file. We used to get files that were made in the Eastern States and then later on they were made by Marbig, but there were one or two others as well at the time.

HC Were the fireworks seasonal?

**McGHEE:** The 5<sup>th</sup> November. The Chinese New Year business we never actually tried to supply them. We probably had some leftover fireworks from 5<sup>th</sup> November. Because of bad behaviour by certain idiots, fireworks came under notice because of kids getting burned and going to the children's hospital with burns – someone's thrown a penny bomb down their neck or something.

HC Before we started recording you showed me a lovely picture of Cyclops Toys, you sold them didn't you?

**McGHEE:** That's right. Well in the shop there was a railing around on top of the other shelving around and we used to put Cyclops Toys up there. We also had a range

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<sup>26</sup> See advertisement for sale of fireworks from McAlindens Pty Ltd., Durham House, Durham Place, Perth in the *Sunday Times*, 20 December 1953, p. 20.

of wooden toys which would include things like blackboards and tables and chairs and other sorts of wooden toys. We used to get them from a couple of sources, one was a chap who made them locally and then I think another firm, I can't quite think of the name. They made a range of wooden toys; we sold quite a few of those, they were quite successful in what they did there. But toys, of course, were pretty much a seasonal Christmas line. You sold them a bit here and there through the year, maybe as somebody's birthday gift or whatever, but mostly it was pretty much Christmas.

HC            You sold, obviously, birthday cards and Christmas cards – tell me about them.

**McGHEE:**    We had a very large range of general cards. We had what called a large range of seasonal cards – just general birthday cards and that. There was John Sands, Hallmark and another one called Moorcroft, that we carried. There might have been another one as well. We had four suppliers in what we called the stock control on the cards. When Christmas time came we also got Christmas cards from all those suppliers as well. But we also had a few that were for... some of the Italian migrant people wanted to send cards to their family back in Italy or wherever they were from, so we used to sell a range of those cards. Those cards were mostly done as what we might know today as a postcard, but it was made with the Italian wording on it. Then of course the person could write on it and being like a postcard it would probably go through the mail cheaper, by air mail, than a normal card as you might buy it today.

HC            Did you sell postage stamps?

**McGHEE:**    That's something we couldn't get a licence for. We might have had a few that we kept on hand to help somebody out, but as a rule, no.

HC            With the cards, did you choose the cards or did you just basically order say three hundred mixed birthday cards – did you get to have a look at them and choose them?

**McGHEE:**    Both. That's one job actually that my mother did on and off. She would go through each of those four suppliers and pick out the cards that she wanted. They were mostly family titles or speciality wife cards and things like that. When the time came for Christmas specifically we used to have – this is where the storeroom came very valuable – we might have gone through a list and probably had about a dozen boxes of special Christmas cards. The box would be so wide, about ten or eleven inches wide and then about so long. We had about ten or twelve boxes of those. They were divided up according to family titles, they were divided up into price brackets. It was a full-on job actually with the cards because people came to us for... They might buy ten, twenty, fifty or more cards at a time because the card giving at that time became a really big thing. It was just something that we went along with and encouraged really.

HC            I don't blame you! [Laughs] When you talked about souvenirs earlier, what sort of souvenirs were you selling?

**McGHEE:** Well souvenirs that were used... they were mostly manufactured souvenirs. Let's go over certain areas. First of all you had hankies, you had a lot of tea towels, you had tablecloths. Now the tablecloths were made to go over a card table, a card table that six people could sit down at. There was a tablecloth that eight people might sit around; there was also round ones.

HC Did they have kangaroos or something on them?

**McGHEE:** Well there was definitely Australiana about them, but they also had wildflowers – wildflowers used to be quite involved with. There were also scenes of Perth. Whatever was looked on as being Australiana.

HC Where did you source them from?

**McGHEE:** First of all there were specific souvenir companies. There might be three or four of those we dealt with. I mentioned to you about J P Keyes, well they used to carry a big range of souvenirs as well.

HC Did the souvenirs originate from China, like they do these days?

**McGHEE:** No. A lot of linen we had, for example, some of it was made in Poland, some English and there was a bit of Asian in there. Chinese souvenir stuff wasn't there initially, but it did creep in and as it crept in it became stronger as time went by. There was also Australian-made souvenirs as well. Sometimes the cloth might be brought in here but the printing on the cloth would be done here. Then there were things like mugs and plates and things like that, Westminster stuff. There were so many different areas like that. As time went by more and more informal stuff came in.

HC Did you always stick with the same suppliers?

**McGHEE:** Not necessarily. I mean I did stick with probably two or three of them, but others came along and I bought from them as well. It depended on what the person had to offer. If the person had something that I thought was really good, well I didn't sit back I jumped in and bought them.

HC How did you find out about what there was on offer, did have travelling salesmen come around and show you?

**McGHEE:** I definitely had salesmen that came around because I think the word got around that when I saw what I wanted, or knew what I could sell, I did jump in and get stuff. Other times you got to recognise what people were looking for and what you could sell, as long as it was attractive and appeared to be reasonably well made.

HC And were you the one mainly the one that did the choosing? I know you said your mum did the cards.

**McGHEE:** Yes, well as time went by I did pretty much all the choosing. When it came to looking at the cards my mother pretty much mostly did the buying. But as

time went by the card companies found that took up too much time, unless you were ordering cards by the boatload or something. We always had a very strong demand for them, but as time went by and they started... the computer business came in and people were just... Just found it was too tiresome or too time-consuming. People also were sending out newsletters rather than just individual handwritten cards. You've probably seen them and received some yourself.

HC With things like the giftware – you mentioned the giftware earlier – what sort of things did you carry in the giftware?

**McGHEE:** Well certainly a lot of glassware, other stuff – it could be vases or just general sort of stuff. There were things like a lady would use on her dressing table, hand-mirrors and combs and brushes and things like that.

HC And did you choose that Rod, too?

**McGHEE:** Oh yes, I did. [Laughter] You just went by what you knew. Some of that stuff – there wasn't a massive range of stuff. A company used to come over from Sydney, their name was Kennard Brothers or something like that. I used to go into the city and... Well a lot of the companies to do with travelling salesmen and that type of thing, they had a base where they had special rooms a travelling salesmen could rent for a week or more. Then they'd lay out their gear and then I would go in and make an appointment with them and I would go in and order whatever I thought I could sell. Some of it was stuff that was European made or American or English or whatever.

HC After you took over from your dad and mum, did you extend the stock into all those other areas?

**McGHEE:** Yes I did. The range of stock that we carried was very large actually.

HC It just sounded very much bigger than what your dad had originally.

**McGHEE:** Yes. Because we had this what we used to call this birdcage area, it was like a little shop within a shop. Consequently you could put quite a range of stuff in there; it was all on glass shelving. Just imagine an average bedroom of your house and then glass shelving all the way around it. The shelving would be spaced apart and from up there down to knee high sort of thing. We had a lot of people coming in and tourists buying all sorts of stuff. We used to sell quite a range of candles for example; we used to buy candles from a candle factory in Bayswater. Then the other things that we used to have and sell, but wherever I found there was a demand for something I searched it out and bought it.

HC You did tell me at one stage that you established direct accounts with the manufacturers.

**McGHEE:** Yes, yes. That was particularly so in stationery. I think as time went by the manufacturers – let's say – were encouraged not to supply me.

HC Why was that?

**McGHEE:** Because some of the wholesale businesses, it meant that they had to sort of compete with me.

HC What, they saw you as competition?

**McGHEE:** Well it was sort of unfair competition as far as I was concerned.

HC They were or you were?

**McGHEE:** They were to me you know because I didn't need some of the wholesale firms so much because I was buying in a reasonable quantity direct. But that meant that, particularly back to school time, I was able to buy and sell more cheaply than they were selling them for. Consequently, I kept up a good... Because of that a lot of the people from the schools came and bought stuff from me. I'd also put baskets outside the front of the shop with goods, particularly things like what you'd call a display book – the very basic one has got twenty pockets in, that you put papers into. There was a special type of file that you could just put papers into, it was just made of manila cardboard. I used to sell thousands of those.

HC So with the booklists, would you get hold of the school booklists and make up individual packages?

**McGHEE:** Well we didn't actually do that because a person would come and buy stuff from me because on that list there were the... There might be one, two, three, four items that the family had because they had a few left over from the previous year. But I also, when a person wanted something I could give them a choice. When you looked at what's on the school list, it was down to certain brands of stuff. Just to give you an example. If a child was say, in Grade One or Grade Two – before that it was primary something – they may be after a thick pencil, colouring-in pencil and sometimes they said in Faber Castell they wanted a thick pencil. But I knew from the direct contact I had that the coloured pencil that would be really appreciated was a lead that had say 6 ml coloured led in it, where a school supplier might say they're asking for, let's say a Faber Castell thick pencil, but in fact the lead one would be slightly less than 4 ml thick. I provided what they wanted, I also provided what I knew the schoolteachers wanted.

HC Stocktaking must have been quite an event at your shop.

**McGHEE:** It was when we did it, yes.

HC How often would you have done it?

**McGHEE:** Well it wasn't every year I can tell you that, but there were times when we had to do it – sometimes more thoroughly than others. I did a quick stocktake so I knew what I had to order for whatever the event was, say for the back to school period.

For example when I ordered ball pens I used to go in quite heavily with the Staedtler ball pen because I found that the Staedtler ball pen was a better quality than others and it had also the grip of the pen was very good. It wasn't round, so if it was on a desk it wouldn't roll off the desk. But also at that stage the ink in it was better than most. Ink in different ball pens today, your gel ink pen<sup>27</sup>, for example, that was made in China, it doesn't last as long as say, a gel ink, that's made in Germany. The same could be said for other ball pens as well. So according to what the customer wanted... If you had a parent in who was buying stuff from you because they wanted the quality in the pen, or the article, whatever it was, you show them whatever was in, and you could say, "That's a better product than that one because of that reason."

HC But from your point of view, say you sold twenty pens, how would you know when to order again, how would you keep a track?

**McGHEE:** Well that might depend on the time of the year. If it was say twenty pens, are we talking about ball pens, or...

HC Well any pens – how would you know when the stock was running out and you needed to re-order again, of anything?

**McGHEE:** Oh well I could just go down to where the shelving stock was and if I see that... generally the most popular colour pen was a blue pen, next was black, then there was other colours as well. You had to order a reasonable amount of stuff because you had to reach a reasonable invoice value.

HC Over a certain number?

**McGHEE:** Well yes, you might have to order at least \$500, you might have to order \$1000.

HC So every so often would you go and wander around the storeroom and make little notes about what you needed to order?

**McGHEE:** Well mostly in the lead up to and including the back to school period, but once that was over, whatever stock you had left over pretty much carried you for the rest of the year.

HC And I guess you'd look at giftware and cards just before Christmas?

**McGHEE:** Well Christmas cards... you had the individual ones that had, let's say, reasonable verses in them, whether it was family titles, or whether it was just a cheap pack of cards – it might sell for a \$1 or \$2, but as long as the quality in the card to encourage the person to buy a better quality card. You probably wouldn't order them until about September/October.

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<sup>27</sup> The ink in a gel pen is comprised of pigment suspended in a water-based gel. This thick and opaque ink shows up more effectively on dark and slick surfaces than normal inks used by ballpoint or felt-tip pens.



HC With all these products that you've got – because you've got a really wide range – how did you work out how to display them?<sup>28</sup>

**McGHEE:** Well we had special card racks.

HC Not just the cards – everything – how did you decide where to put the toys, where to put the cards, where to put the stationery, where to put the newspapers?

**McGHEE:** Oh well according to the demand of the product, you gave it the space according to demand.

HC So the more demand, the more space?

**McGHEE:** That's right, yes.

HC And looking at that – in the more obvious position?

**McGHEE:** Oh well, to some extent. I had my Uncle Jack make me a special stand to put a lot of the stationery on. On that we were able to stock all the popular pens and pencils and all that sort of thing. That was good at the time, but the display methods changed. To do what I should have done, I would have to really spend a large amount of money renovating the shop to do it and I just thought well I can't do it any more.

HC But you didn't have a particular member of staff that did window display or anything like that?

**McGHEE:** I used to. I used to have two ladies; there was Lois and Tanya. Now Tanya was much better at window display than Lois was<sup>29</sup>. So you looked at each person's capabilities and flair in those directions. Someone that is good at window-dressing and you felt that they could do a reasonable job of it, I gave them the job to do that particular thing. A lot of things you just looked for... Anybody who has got a flair in different directions so you just worked along towards those lines yourself. I never had the energy or the time to do all these things myself so I just got other people, who I had...

HC Like the lady who helped with the accounts.

**McGHEE:** Yes.

HC Who did the cleaning because it was quite a big, complicated area to clean wasn't it?

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<sup>28</sup> See Attachment Four for view inside of the newsagency at 883 Albany Highway and also at 869 Albany Highway.

<sup>29</sup> See Attachment Four for picture of Lois Dawson, with another staff member, Judith Styles.

**McGHEE:** Well yes. Mostly the ladies who I had on the staff would go around cleaning as well. Apart from the floor being vacuumed every day you also need to have a cloth and duster at hand to wipe clean or dust down the shelving as well.

HC When was it vacuumed?

**McGHEE:** Oh well in the morning of every day.

HC First thing before customers came in or before the shop opened?

**McGHEE:** Oh well generally it would probably be about nine o'clock in the morning or thereabouts.

HC What about banking the takings, Rod?

**McGHEE:** Well that used to be up to me to do. I used to bank as need be. I had a safe in the floor of the basement if I needed to keep money there of a night-time, where it's secure. I used to have a box of stuff over the top of that floor safe. It never got attacked once so...

HC And did you keep a float in the till?

**McGHEE:** Oh yes, yes. Used to put about \$440 regularly in the till each day, as the float. You would have a bundle of \$5 notes, a bundle of tens, a bundle of twenties, and then you would make sure there was at least \$10 worth of 20 cent pieces there and a few 50 cent pieces. That used to pretty much take care of it all.

HC Tell me about your daily timetable, what time would you get up?

**McGHEE:** Well it depended on what day it was. That was often according to the thickness of the paper. Generally Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday, they were all days of average thickness. Wednesday tended to be a thicker paper, Saturday certainly was. So it could be that according to how many I had to roll and parcels I had to make up I might get up at four o'clock in the morning one morning and another day I might get out at half-past four. Another day I might get out at half-past three. Just depending on what the need was.

HC Then what, did you roll the newspapers?

**McGHEE:** Yes, I'd roll the newspapers in the rolling machine, say with the plastic wrap and then pack them in the van and then go out and deliver them.

HC When would you have breakfast?

**McGHEE:** I'd have breakfast when I returned after the round, it would probably be around seven, half-past seven. The shop opened half-past eight to nine o'clock.

HC So you had about an hour for breakfast then?

**McGHEE:** Yes, yes.

HC Then what would you do after the shop opened?

**McGHEE:** Well when one of the staff turned up I would then go and put my feet up for maybe an hour, half-an-hour, depending on how tired I was. Sometimes I had a need to go over to a warehouse and get some goods for an order. I guess in some cases as far as me going to a warehouse there was more pressure put on me at back to school period than other times of the year. Our busiest time really was at back to school time, not Christmas – after Christmas and the first week of January.

HC Did you do any serving in the shop or did you leave that to the staff?

**McGHEE:** I'd do some serving in the shop before they arrived. Then when they did arrive I would, depending on whether I needed to, go to a warehouse... There were a few warehouses in Belmont I might have to go to, or over to Osborne Park. But mostly if I needed something I could get on the phone and order it in.

HC What time would the shop close?

**McGHEE:** Oh, that was at least seven o'clock.

HC What time would the staff go home?

**McGHEE:** They would probably go home at half-past five or six o'clock and then I used to run the shop myself.

HC Then you would close up and have dinner?

**McGHEE:** Yes, yes. Well if I didn't cook it myself I'd... in latter years I might go down to the Balmoral Hotel on a Tuesday night – they used to have a steak meal down there – so I could get a Porterhouse steak for \$15. I couldn't have done it myself for that, you'd have to do all the preparation work and all the rest of it. I could go out and do something like that.

HC Did you do any bookwork in the evening before you went to bed?

**McGHEE:** I might have done a little bit, but I didn't do too much, I ended up doing it mostly on a Sunday. I didn't open the shop on a Sunday I might add. I did like to go to church. I used to go up to St David's, as it was called. It became the Uniting Church. In other words the Methodists, the Congregationalists and the Presbyterians, all combined to make the Uniting Church, which happened forty years ago.

HC Did you feel any pressure to open on a Sunday?

**McGHEE:** Well I did, especially at back to school time, but because I had somebody out the front selling the *Sunday Times* - as long as I provided an outlet for people to

buy a paper, that's what satisfied them. You have to try and look after yourself a little bit so I kind of just did that.

**END OF SECOND INTERVIEW SESSION**

### THIRD INTERVIEW SESSION

HC This is the third interview session held with Rod McGhee for the Town of Victoria Park, held at his home in Lockridge on Thursday 15 February 2018. The interviewer is Heather Campbell.

Rod, you've remembered a few things about stock you'd like to mention.

**McGHEE:** That's what brought a lot of people to us was the depth of stock that we had. I mentioned to before we started recording about staples. For example there was a staple that had an arch in it. That meant that when you put it in the Bostitch machine it had a better penetration than one that didn't. That was a particular thing to do with Bostitch. I had a guy that used to run a business over Dianella way and he used to come over to me just to buy those staples because I knew exactly what he wanted. A lot of places that you would go into wouldn't have a clue about that sort of thing, but I just happened to know about all that sort of thing.

HC When business was becoming affected by electronic media, did you try and diversify the stock?

**McGHEE:** Well I did. I listened to a lot of my customers and what their needs and wants were. I also read things and started to get more into art material. Though we had Jacksons down the road a lot of people were put off by when they couldn't exactly say what they wanted etc., the staff sort of put them down a bit verbally. That didn't go down too well at all. Course there was also an art house in, I think it was Sussex Street, where people who were interested in art – it didn't matter what medium they used, but they could talk with other people of like minds and maybe get information and maybe get some instruction and help. I was also in touch with a number of those sort of people who went to that particular house. I guess because of my interest generally I learnt a lot from the art people as well as myself.

HC Did they start buying from you after you started to stock it?

**McGHEE:** Well there was some people who did buy from me. I know there was an art class in Swan Cottage Homes, for example, and a few people came to buy off me certain things. They'd ask me for, let's say a special tape for when you'd done your painting you'd sort of seal the back of it. What they were wanting was a special gum tape, in other words it was a pearl gum tape, it was brown and about, let's say, two inches wide. You would put it through a bath of water and then that would activate the glue and then you would stick it and hold the painting inside the frame with that. Now pearl gum tape was better than normal tape that you used which might be rubber-based or similar because it would last. The adhesive didn't break down like the rubber-based tape would usually. The rubber-based tape might be good for ten or twenty years, depending in what conditions it was kept but the pearl could last for 80-100 years.

HC           What about competition from businesses such as Officeworks?

**McGHEE:**    That came along in latter years. But because of their advertising etc., which was very aggressive it took a lot of the trade away from us. In some cases they pulled the wool over people's eyes by their advertising. I'll give you an example. When a person wanted a ruler for primary school, the rulers that they supplied them with had imperial and metric on them. Now the schools, what they wanted was a metric ruler. It's things like that I knew. By the way Officeworks still put these imperial/metric rulers on sale today.

HC           Did your efforts to diversify help at all in keeping the business going?

**McGHEE:**    Well it did because I was supplying stationery and certain art material to people that were in university. It was virtually from pre-primary right through primary years and high school years – you know if they went to Wesley College of Penrhos, I had the gear there which is what they wanted, on their school lists. I had people like that come to me.

HC           Right, so it did help a bit?

**McGHEE:**    Oh yes, yes, it did help a bit. But the problem was of course that Officeworks and other school suppliers got about 90% of the business.

HC           Is there anything else about stock you want to talk about, Rod?

**McGHEE:**    With regard to the stock whatever it was I held pretty much the full range of whatever it was. We had a huge range of staples that were used in different sized machines. They were also used in tackers. You could only stock a certain amount but I used to have about fifty or more different sizes in them. Also things like rubber bands. I used to sell rubber bands from size 6 or 8, right through to, let's say 150. In those rubber bands there was different thicknesses in them. Size 16, which was a popular size, would be used for putting around money for banking. There was 10, 12, 14, 16, 18 and then they would jump into the thicker ones, into their thirties and then there would be another range going into the sixties and also thicker again. Sometimes a rubber band, like a 135 for example, might be used for a person doing exercises with it, stretching your arms and stuff – because the band would stretch out like that.

HC           Did other businesses like Officeworks not carry that amount of detailed stock?

**McGHEE:**    No. They would carry the more popular ones, like the ones I mentioned to you about size 16 and maybe 14 and then jumping to a 32, 33, 35 and maybe one into the sixties, though that would be it. Of course you had to store them an area where you either had a large turnover, we sort of did that, but I also kept them in my basement, away from the light and heat. Both of those things destroy rubber bands.

HC            You mentioned last time about a burst water main pipe, in the late 1980s or early 1990s.

**McGHEE:**    Yes, it was at a least thirty years ago. I distinctly remember it being on Australia Day, which was 26 January. It was on a weekend. The main water pipe that went down Albany Highway under the road burst. I guess it must have been first of all a leak and then it developed further than that. It virtually made a huge hole in Albany Highway, and the Main Roads Department and the Water Supply had to use earth-moving equipment and dig up the road and repair that pipe. Where it was a steel pipe they used plastic pipes instead. But it meant that they had three or four goes at doing it. So they would dig up the hole, put this piece of pipe in replacement and then fill it in again and then the highway could be used for traffic. Then if it still caused a problem a couple of days would go by and they still had to dig it up again. The same thing happened three or four times. One thing that also happened as far as I was concerned, there was a geyser of water came out of the road, from this pipeline, and hit my front door of the shop. This was at 869. It hit the front doors but also the water seeped right through the floor of my shop and into the basement underneath; we had quite a large basement. But also it affected me in the fact that I had to go and deliver papers in the morning so I had a rolling machine at the back in the shed and then I had to get the van out of the driveway onto the road so I could and deliver my papers. Fortunately at the time I had an Oregon wooden plank that was roughly about six or more metres long. It would have been about 30 cms wide and about 30 ml thick. I could put the plank on, covering the hole, and all of the van on firm ground and then drive out of the driveway, so I could go and deliver my papers.

HC            What stock did you lose then, if the basement got flooded?

**McGHEE:**    Anything that was paper and got water-damaged, depending on how badly damaged it was. Well in some cases it just had to go in the rubbish bin. Other things where something might be in a cardboard box then we could partly dry that out and sell what was inside of it. Sometimes you'd get a place where it would cause a sort of corrosion there to a degree.

HC            What about carpet?

**McGHEE:**    Well we had hogs-hair carpet tiles on the floor of the shop. With the industrial floor fans which the insurance company put in place, it gradually dried that out and the carpet tiles could be reused, so there was nothing like that actually thrown out. But the hogs-hair carpet tile, if anyone knows anything about carpet tiles, these are made for heavy industrial use and would stand up to a lot of wear and mistreatment.

HC            So did the insurance pay for the damaged stock?

**McGHEE:**    Well they did give me a cheque for about \$10 000, but I felt they were renegeing on the real damage. But they also took two or three years to do that.

HC Did you get any compensation from the Water Authority?

**McGHEE:** No.

HC Did they come and help pump the shop out?

**McGHEE:** No. The insurance company supplied the fans and that gradually dried things out. It caused a huge amount of trouble at the time.

HC You've lived in Vic Park for a very long, what are the changes to Vic Park – what was it like when you moved there compared with what it was like when you left?

**McGHEE:** Well Vic Park when we first moved into the area – that was in 1953 – Vic Park was more or less like a small country town. For example just down the road on the other side of us used to be a produce merchant. He used to sell hay and oats and wheat and those sorts of things for people who had horses in their backyards, or thereabouts. The produce merchant guy was there for a couple of years and then they eventually decided to move out. I saw the Town of Victoria Park grow from a small country town to like what it is today. At that time too there was also trams that went down the road. I didn't have a lot to do with trams, because I was going to primary school and high school. The trams were also replaced with buses.

HC Do you like the way Vic Park has changed?

**McGHEE:** Oh to a lot of extent I guess I do, but one thing I do remember which wasn't so good was the fact that I used to go to Youth Group on Friday evenings and you could walk down Albany Highway at midnight – and this also included young ladies – with no fear of being molested, but you couldn't do that today. Vic Park in those days was a much safer place than it is today.

HC What sort of personality does it take to make good newsagent?

**McGHEE:** Well I think one thing is that you have to be able to listen to your customers and to find out what people are wanting. You have to be able to talk to them. Also you might be asked for certain things and I guess it's up to you to search out where you would be able to purchase those things. You have to do the hard things as well as the easy things.

HC You're saying that customer service then....

**McGHEE:** Well that's pretty high on the list. Because of, I guess, my interest in what the customers were wanting and most of my knowledge in stationery, we grew to being a store that carried a large range of toys and giftware and things. When the shopping centre up the road opened up it took half of our business away from us overnight. So I had to diversify the range of stationery – the range of stuff that we had and particularly go into stationery in the area that wasn't catered for in the shopping



centre. That also meant in school supply and things like that. At one time we used to sell a very large range of books, particularly paperbacks and other hard cover books. That changed too because we couldn't compete with the prices that Target were putting them out at. They also had more room to display that sort of thing than we did.

HC Are there any of your customers that stand out in your mind – any regulars that you can remember?

**McGHEE:** Oh yes. Well there was a customer for example, his name was Justin. He used to come in and buy often a week's editions of papers at that time. He was also very interested in stuff to do with coins and banknotes and things like that.

HC So did he buy a whole week's papers at once.

**McGHEE:** At once.

HC So would you save the back copies for him?

**McGHEE:** Well we used to return the papers at least once a week. In the case of the *Sunday Times* we used to return those once a month, then it became weekly. Yes, as I said, you got to know what the customer's needs and wants were. So you just organised yourself to be able to do that. In the case of Justin, well we could easily put a week's papers aside. But we also had people who – one of their relatives had died and they wanted the advertisement notice of it, for reference, and to keep. By keeping the week's supply of papers there we were able to easily to that.

HC Any other customers stand out in your mind?

**McGHEE:** Oh well I had a lady who was a music teacher. She used to teach music to one of the schools down the bottom end – I think it's now known as Regent's College. She was also involved with the Seventh Day Adventist Church and school down at the bottom end of Victoria Park.

HC What did she buy from the shop?

**McGHEE:** Oh well she would buy, let's say, things like display books and also sheet protectors – she used to buy quite a few sheet protectors. I remember a chap who was a Uniting Church minister down at Rockingham, he used to come and buy A5 lever arch files off me because a lot of people wouldn't stock that sort of thing. But I used to go along to a binder manufacturer in Welshpool and get ten or more of those at a time. I guess it was things like that.

HC You made a decision to close and you closed I think, it was about Friday 11 August 2017 – why did you decide to pull up stumps?

**McGHEE:** Well one thing is I got sick. At the time I got shingles in my head and right eye. That meant that I couldn't drive the vehicle; that meant that I couldn't deliver

newspapers. Also I was seventy-five and I felt that I didn't have the strength that I used to have. Although I could do a lot of things and had a lot of knowledge, but I found I couldn't do a few things. For example when I got a puncture in my van, I had a hydraulic jack that I could put under the vehicle and lift it up and take the tyre off, but I didn't have the strength to put the spare on. I just couldn't lift it up to align it with the studs on the vehicle to tighten the nuts on it.

HC But you opted to close down rather than sell the business.

**McGHEE:** Well for one thing I couldn't see a person buying the business as a newsagents. All the businesses that I had around me, that used to be there, were no longer there. They had gradually sold their business off or they closed it down and rented the premises out. For example there was a business known as Photo Hendriks, which was next door to me – I knew the Hendriks family from the time that they moved in there, back in the fifties. The business of general shopping had moved away from there. It mostly went into the shopping centres or further away. I felt also at the time the Council were encouraging restaurants to come and set up in East Victoria Park. If you went to East Vic Park on a Friday evening you would find the area alive with people who were going there to have to a meal, whether it was a pop-up café thing that was in the laneway across the road or in the... Sometimes in the summer months they had it in John McMillan Park across the road from the shopping centre. Well the area was no longer an area for small business people.

HC So Rod, when you made that decision was it a relief or were you sad about it?

**McGHEE:** Well I guess both. [Laughs] Because the business virtually had been part of my life for so long and a lot of customers became friends. We just sometimes could talk about all sorts of things. You kind of learned a lot from them and probably they from you.

HC How did you go about the process of closing down?

**McGHEE:** Well I largely left that to my two sons because I was too sick to do it to start off with.

HC Had they been involved in the business with you?

**McGHEE:** Well involved because they were part of family but mostly they weren't.

HC So they had other careers?

**McGHEE:** Well see my elder son Gary, he has a business to do with designing software which he does from home, but then he moves around a fair a bit. He does certain government work and he does other things for other companies, designing the software for whatever they might want. My other son, Doug, he is now a chaplain at Toodyay District High School. He had been also at Moora and Gingin. Also he took on

a position where he was in charge of other chaplains and he covered an area of the State the size of Victoria.

HC            So Doug and Gary took over and...

**McGHEE:**    It was also the Christmas break, which was also school holiday time and it meant that both my sons could work together and they also brought in other members of the whole family and some of their friends in doing so. It was a massive job and a lot of the stock was actually almost given away because they tried to sell it, but they couldn't get a buyer for it. But that's virtually what happened.

HC            But what happened to the block and the building that your dad put in all those years ago?

**McGHEE:**    Well the building was sold by auction and the chap who did the auction selling – I think it was mostly sold online. But as time went by some of the people who thought they might get the property extra cheap, well they were out-bid. This went on for a least a month anyway, that I know of. Mind you we all seem in a slump at the present time because of the downturn of the mining companies. There was quite a few people in the area that were what you call 'fly-in, fly-out' workers and they lost their jobs, which meant that the downturn affected the prices of property. But I feel myself in a year or two's time the price of the property will go up about 50%.

HC            What is going to happen to that block and building, do you know?

**McGHEE:**    Well I don't know exactly, but I think they were going to try and encourage a business of some sort to come in there. But I think long-term it will end up being another restaurant.

HC            When you look back on all your years as a newsagent in Vic Park, what do those years mean to you?

**McGHEE:**    Well largely my involvement with the business of 869. I think mostly they were fairly satisfying, but I also saw... The whole business of being a newsagent changed a lot.

HC            In what way?

**McGHEE:**    Well the sort of range of stock that you held for example. See at one time we used to sell a massive range of toys. I used to go to several of the particular toy wholesalers and get, let's say, one or two truckloads of toys, which we sold for Christmas. We sold things like wooden toys, tables and chairs and blackboards and prams and all sorts of things and also a lot of Cyclops toys; Cyclops toys were very popular at the time. One of the things that I did when I came home from school...

HC            Yes, you mentioned that you had to build them.

**McGHEE:**    I had to put them together!

HC Do you ever wish Rod, that you had done something else apart from being a newsagent?

**McGHEE:** Well see when I worked for Atkins – I was there for seven years – I learned a lot about things that I was involved with. That meant paint; that meant oil-based paint, it meant water-based paints. In that era there was a lot of Spread Satin, for example, used. Then I also learned a lot about abrasives, grinding wheels, cutting off wheels, all things to do with any industry that would be used in a small or large engineering workshop. I learned a lot about packings that would be used. Another thing they had there was belting that was used in timber mills.

HC You mentioned that last time. So do you wish you'd gone down that track?

**McGHEE:** Well it probably means that I wouldn't be divorced today for one thing!  
[Laughter]

HC I think you've had the most interesting career and the Town of Victoria Park really appreciates being able to record your memories.

**McGHEE:** Well, yes, and I guess I've still got bits and pieces to tell. For example when the tramline was put up Albany Highway. It only used to go down the bottom end, but it was extended up the road further into the top end of East Vic Park because it was needed to bring workers for the ammunition factory in the Second World War. That same factory site became where they built Chamberlain Tractors. Chamberlain Tractors are no longer there and I think it became a large warehouse site.

HC We'll have to get you to write some of those memories down, because this time we had to focus on the newsagency. You better get your pen out and do a bit of writing now Rod!

**McGHEE:** Well I sort of intend to, to do with my own family history. But there's all sorts of business firms that used to be in Vic Park like Charlie Carters, Walsh's - the menswear and a number of other things.

HC Yes.

**END OF THIRD INTERVIEW SESSION**

**END OF INTERVIEW**

## **LIST OF ATTACHMENTS**

### **ATTACHMENT ONE**

The Ghee family history copied from *The Family Records of Daniel and Elizabeth McGee and Descendants* by Shirley and Graham Galpin, pages 70-74.

### **ATTACHMENT TWO**

Alexander Daniel McGhee and his wife Eva (née Hodges), Rod McGhee's parents c. 1962

### **ATTACHMENT THREE**

Map of areas covered by newspaper rounds.

Delivery car, c. 1970s

### **ATTACHMENT FOUR**

Inside McGhee's Newsagency, at 883 Albany Highway, undated

Inside McGhee's Newsagency, at 869 Albany Highway in the 1990s

Two of the staff of McGhee's newsagency at 869 Albany Highway Judith Styles (left) and Lois Dawson (right)

### **ATTACHMENT FIVE**

Building of newsagency at 869 Albany Highway, c. late fifties, early sixties

McGhee's Newsagency in the early days, no date

McGhee's Newsagency, circa 1970s (Photograph by Photo Hendricks)

View down Albany Highway early 1970s, Photo Hendricks store and McGhee's Newsagency at right (Photograph by Photo Hendricks)

Alexander Daniel McGhee preparing newspapers for delivery c. 1970s

Alexander, Eva and their son Rod McGhee outside their shop, unknown date


869 Albany Highway c 1990

## ATTACHMENT ONE


The Ghee family history copied from *The Family Records of Daniel and Elizabeth McGee and Descendants* by Shirley and Graham Galpin, pages 70-74.

**ALEXANDER MCKELL**

**SECOND (2ND) CHILD of DANIEL and ELIZABETH MCGHEE**



*Alexander and Hannah McGhee (nee Hardy).  
Mount Magnet WA - 1902*



*Hannah and Alexander McGhee with Grandson  
Rodney at Mt. Lawley WA -1942*

**ALEXANDER MCKELL MCGHEE**, second child of Daniel and Elizabeth McGhee was born at Pekina SA, on the 29th April 1859 in the district of Frome, S.A. He married Hannah HARDY at Mount Magnet WA, in 1902. Hannah was born in 1871 at Melbourne, Victoria, (daughter of Alfred Hardy and Mary Wilson). Alexander worked on stations while young, later going to Wilmington where he was engaged in carpentry work before going to live in Western Australia. He was lured to the Western Australian goldfields and travelled from Wilmington to Adelaide then by ship to Perth and onto Geraldton. He had his carpentry tools carried by one of the camel trains and he walked the full journey from Geraldton to Mt. Magnet in approximately five weeks. The route travelled was that of the supply bullock and camel trains and general horse drawn carts and wagons taking supplies and people into the area. It is not known when Alexander went to Western Australia but the rush into the Mt.Magnet area commenced December 1891. His younger brothers Daniel Malcolm and William James went to the Boulder goldfields in 1896 and they travelled from Albany/Esperance by foot taking them in excess of five weeks. Alexander worked in the mines and Hannah had a greengrocer business in Mount Magnet for some time. Hannah, a Salvation Army member, recalls attending meetings in the Melbourne Exhibition hall to hear General Booth preach. Alexander brought water home from the mines at both lunch and evening. (16 gallons of water was used for their daily needs). Their son Alexander was born in East Perth in 1907 and records show they were still living in Mt.Magnet in 1918. The constant fine dust in the remote region affected Hannah's health, (asthma). They were advised to move and chose Perth. They went to Perth and procured a business. Records from 1925 show it as a store situated at 1000 Wellington Street, Perth WA. Their son Rob wanted to go into a newsagency business and they helped him do this of Mt. Lawley, where they worked with him for some years in the business. Alexander (son) passed away in Mt.Lawley WA, on the 12th July 1948. Hannah died on the 21st December 1961. Both are buried at Karrakatta cemetery WA. They had only one child, a son, Alexander Daniel (Rob).



*Alexander (Rob) and Eva McGhee (nee Hodges)  
Perth W.A. - 1939.*



*From left: Winnifred, Rodney, Eva, Rob, Milton  
and Hannah McGhee. Perth W.A. - 1959*

Alexander (Rob) Daniel McGHEE, was born in East Perth WA on the 26th February 1907 and he married Eva HODGES. Eva was born on the 10th May 1915. Rob recalls going to school at Mt. Magnet and when it rained they went outside and would look for any gold particles, as the rain would clear the dust off and the gold would glisten. The family moved to Perth and in 1933 Rob, with the help of his parents, established a newsagency at 563 Beaufort Street, Mount Lawley. He spent 20 years in the area building the business up by selling newspapers, magazines and chemist lines, fishing tackle and other general merchandise. In the 2nd World War Rob was an appointed Air Raid Patrol warden and was also available to be used as an emergency communication centre with his team of bicycled delivery newsboys. The business moved to Albany Highway, East Victoria Park where both Rob and Eva worked hard, as well as raising a family. They became actively involved with the Methodist church with Rob becoming a local preacher. They had three children Rodney Alexander, Winnifred Eva and Milton Geoffrey. Rob passed away on the 3rd September 1993 and he was cremated and his ashes were scattered over his parent's graves at Karrakatta cemetery, Perth WA.

Rodney Alexander McGHEE, first child of Rob and Eva McGhee was born in Perth WA, on the 8th September 1941. He married Carol GOBBY. They had two children Gary Alexander and Douglas Rodney. Rodney conducts the East Victoria Park business started by his father and grandparents. Rodney, like his parents works long hours in the business. Rodney and Carol are divorced.

Gary Alexander McGHEE, was born in Perth WA on the 30th December 1970. Gary qualified as a computer programmer from the Curtin University and has commenced his own computer software business Redearth. He lives at Booragan WA.

Douglas Rodney McGHEE, was born in Perth WA, on the 12th September 1972. Douglas has completed a degree in Business Administration at Murdoch University. He has also qualified from the Baptist Theological College as a trained youth leader and as an Uniting Church Youth Chaplain. He resides in Perth WA.



*Rob McGhee Newspaper shop, Victoria Park  
113 Albany Hwy WA - 1956*



*Douglas, Rodney and Gary McGhee  
Perth WA - December 1996*

Winnifred Eva McGHEE, second child of Rob and Eva McGhee was born in Perth WA, on the 25th March 1944. She married Graeme Lindsay SAYAGE on the 7th September 1968 at the Methodist Church Victoria Park WA. Graeme was born in Perth WA (son of George Savage and Ada Duplone Arnold). Winnifred is a trained registered nurse and midwife. They farmed initially at Williams WA, south of Perth off the Albany Highway with sheep and mixed grain, and then moved to the south east district of Kulin in 1977. They moved into the Kulin Township in 1998 and continue to the farm from there. They have three children Brendon John, Ainsley Gae and Kim Renae.

Brendon John SAYAGE, was born in Perth WA, on the 1st October 1970. Brendon has a Bachelor of Business in Agriculture from Curtin University and is working the family farm near Kulin WA. Brendon became engaged in September 1998.

Ainsley Gae SAYAGE, was born in Perth WA, on the 29th December 1971. Ainsley has a Bachelor of Science in Physical Education and worked in the respiratory section of the Perth Medical Hospital. She spent 1995 working in England and currently working in Singapore. Ainsley became engaged in September 1998.

Kim Renae SAYAGE, was born in Narrogin WA, on the 1st December 1974. Renae is a qualified nurse passing her nursing degree at the Curtin University, Perth WA.

Milton Geoffrey McGHEE, third child of Rob and Eva McGhee, was born in Perth WA, on the 2nd July 1946. He married Nola Denise GEORGE. Nola was born at Gingin WA, on the 8th August 1950 (daughter of Frank George and Doreen Carmody). Milton is a Social Worker and was employed initially in Canberra, A.C.T., his work is now in Perth. Nola is employed in the Commonwealth Public Service. They have three children, Jocelyn Ruth, Bronwyn Elizabeth and David Alexander.

Jocelyn Ruth McGHEE, was born in Canberra ACT, on the 3rd April 1980.

Bronwyn Elizabeth McGHEE, was born in Canberra ACT, on the 6th March 1983.

David Alexander John McGHEE, was born in Canberra ACT, on the 14th October 1986.





*Alexander (Rob) and Eva McGhee with their eight (8) Grandchildren.  
Perth W.A. - 1990*



*Rodney, Eva and Milton McGhee  
Perth W.A. 1996*



*Rob McGhee with son Rodney & Shirley Galpin  
EPT Victoria Park WA, 1987 TOP ALBANY HIGH*



*Brendan & Graeme Savage.*



*Ainsley, Winnifred & Kim Savage.  
Photos taken Kalin W.A. October 1987.*



*Graeme and Winnifred Savage.*



*Standing: Nola (nee George), Milton McGhee with Children  
Jocelyn, David and Bronwyn. Perth W.A. 1996.*



**ATTACHMENT TWO**



Alexander Daniel McGhee and his wife Eva (née Hodge),  
Rod McGhee's parents c. 1962

### ATTACHMENT THREE

Map of areas covered by newspaper rounds.





Delivery car, c. 1970s

## ATTACHMENT FOUR



Inside McGhee's Newsagency, at 883 Albany Highway, undated



Inside McGhee's Newsagency, at 869 Albany Highway in the 1990s



Inside McGhee's Newsagency, at 869 Albany Highway in the 1990s





Two of the staff of McGhee's newsagency at 869 Albany Highway  
Judith Styles (left) and Lois Dawson (right)

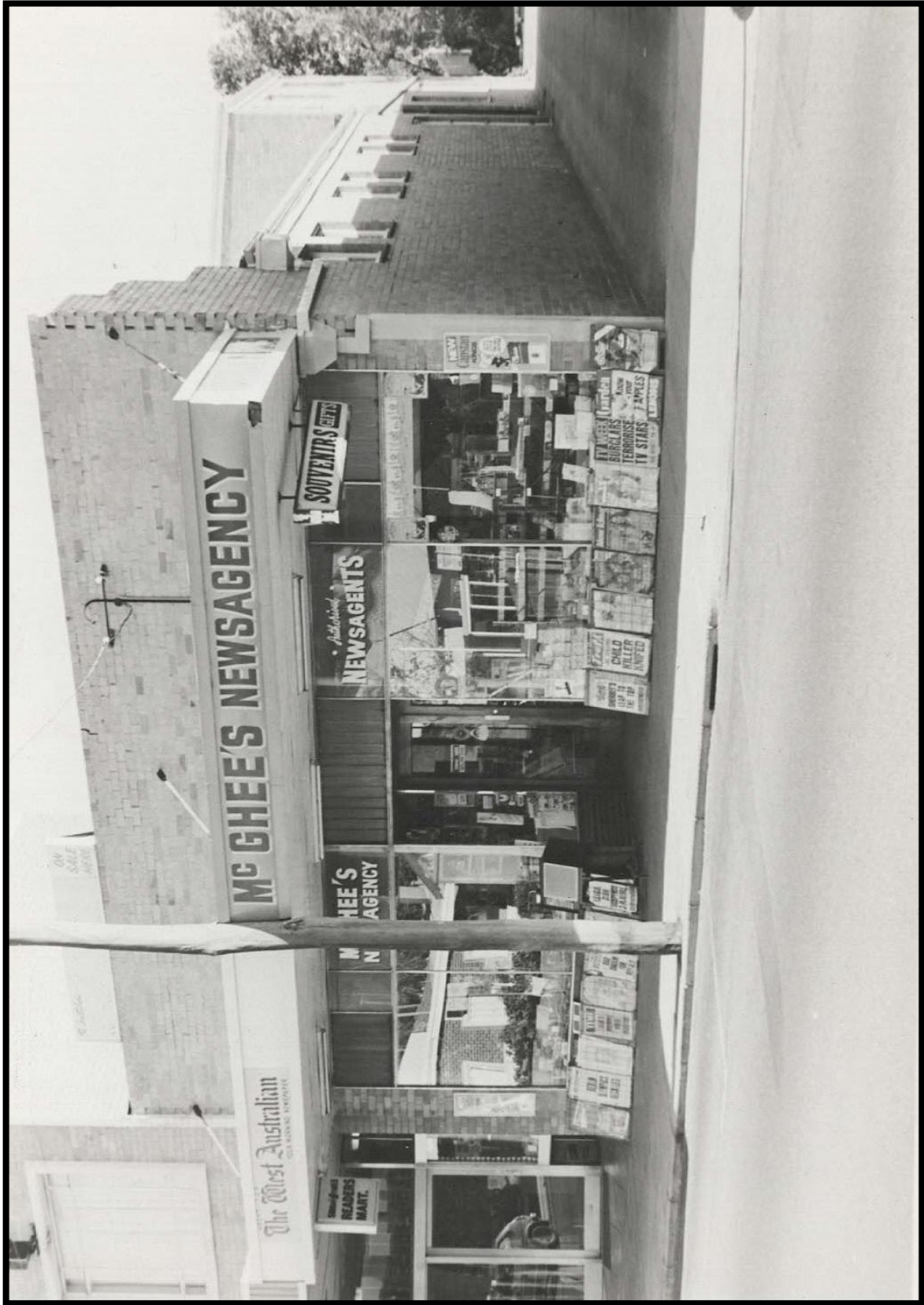
ATTACHMENT FIVE



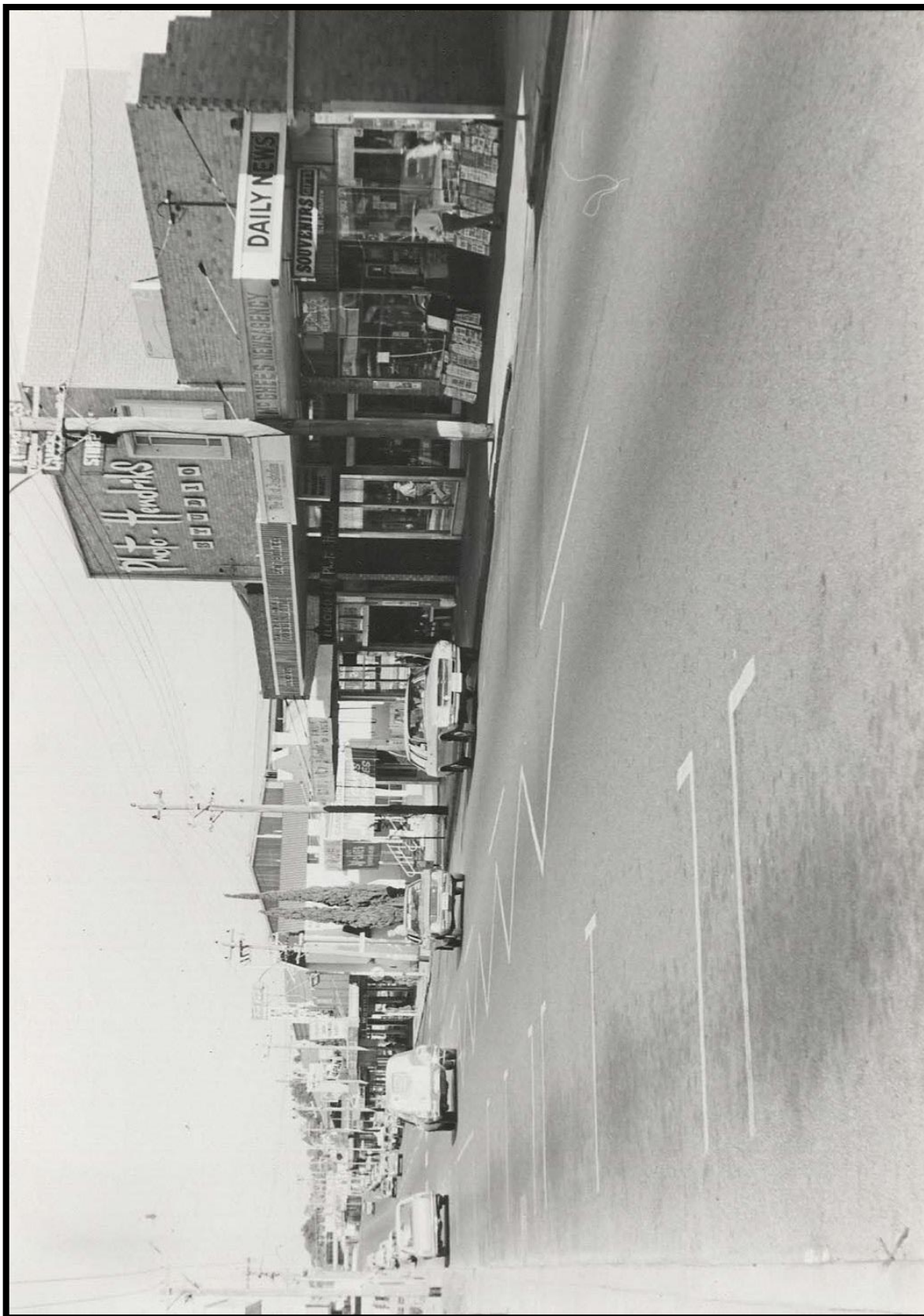
Building of newsagency at 869 Albany Highway, c. ???



McGhee's Newsagency in the early days, no date



McGhee's Newsagency, circa 1970s (Photograph by Photo Hendricks)



View down Albany Highway early 1970s, Photo Hendricks store and McGhee's Newsagency at right (Photograph by Photo Hendricks)



Alexander Daniel McGhee preparing newspapers for delivery c. 1970s



869 Albany Highway c 1990

(Overpage: Alexander, Eva and their son Rod McGhee outside their shop, unknown date.)



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**Rodney Alexander McGee, was born 1941 in Subiaco, the first child of Alexander Daniel McGhee and his wife Eva (nee Hodges). He had two siblings, Winifred and Milton.**

The family lived in Beaufort Street, Mt Lawley, where Alexander McGhee, assisted by his parents, had bought a small newsagency. He was anxious to expand into a larger business and in the late forties or early fifties, the family moved to a newsagency with more potential at 883 Albany Highway. During the six or seven years spent there Rod McGhee went to East Victoria Park Primary School. He completed his education at Kent Street High School after the family and the newsagency had transferred to purpose-built premises at 869 Albany Highway; a move prompted by his father's wish to own the building which housed the business.

From a young age, he assisted in the work of the newsagency, learning the newsboys' rounds in case he was needed and assembling Cyclops toys. In his early twenties Rod McGhee came into the business more fully when his parents went away on a trip, serving 'an apprenticeship of sorts' to learn the ropes before taking over completely. The business grew and he extended the range of stock, priding himself on his customer service. He worked in this challenging commercial environment until the Newsagency closed in 2017.

**Session One: 1:43:52**

**Session Two: 1:58:41**

**Session Three: 37:10**

