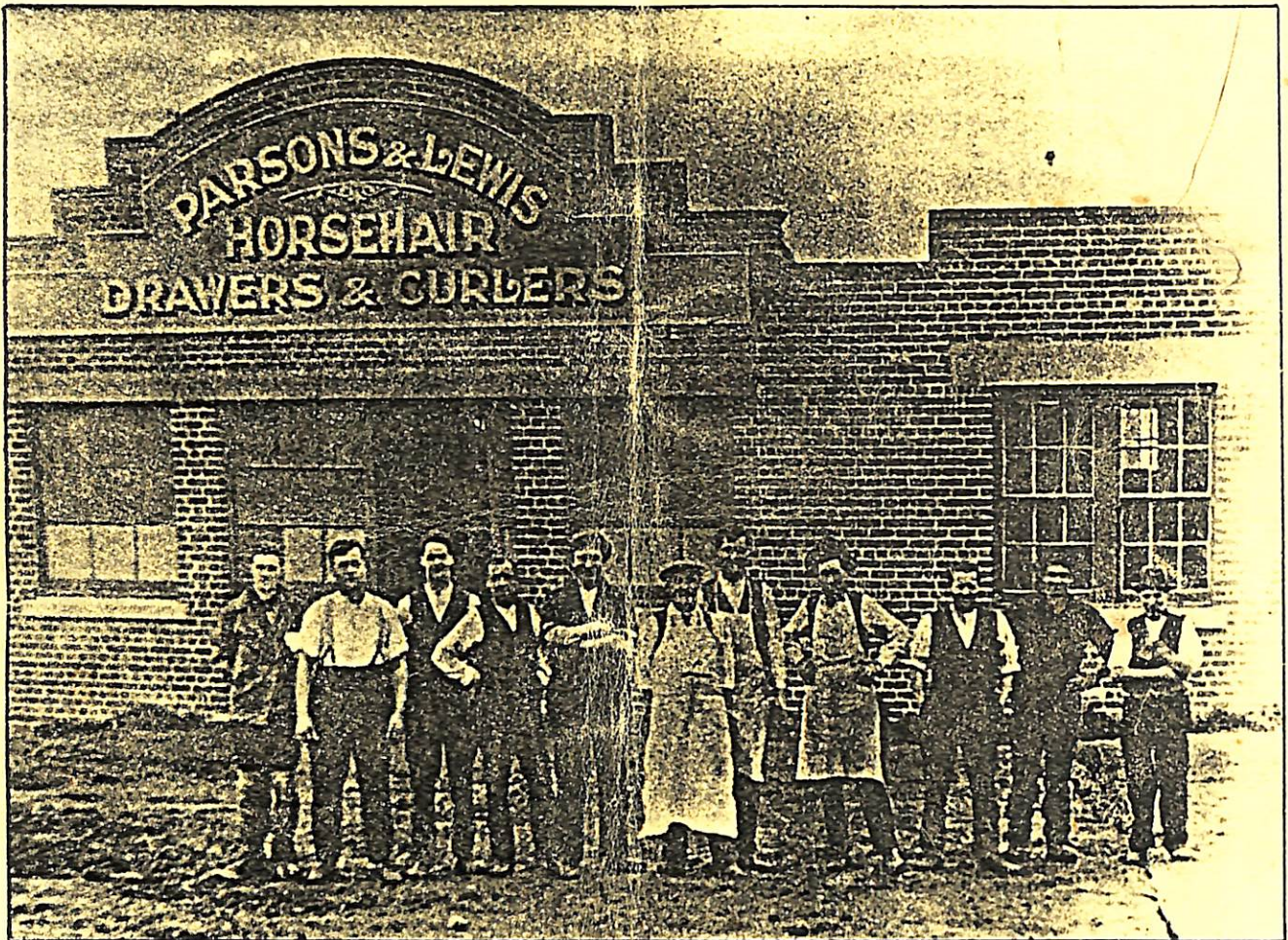


THE DRAWERS & CURLERS
PARSONS & LEWIS 1887-1988



PETER PARSONS

© P.R. Parsons, 1988

Cover photo: Parsons & Lewis workers c.1924
Joe Parsons second from left; Alf Noble third from left

Printed by Melbourne's Living Museum of the West Inc.,
14 David Street, Footscray.

THE DRAWERS & CURLERS;
A SHORT HISTORY OF PARSONS & LEWIS PTY. LTD.

SUNSHINE
1887-1988

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PETER PARSONS

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PREFACE

This short account of Parsons & Lewis Pty. Ltd. (P & L), one of Sunshine's first and perhaps most unique industries was compiled to leave a permanent record of one little-known aspect of Australian industrial history. Although in some respects the animal hair dressing trades are obsolete, the material itself has qualities that are not replaceable by synthetic fibres, and the healthy demand for this natural product will ensure that the business founded by Edmund Parsons in 1887 will continue, albeit under changed management.

Thanks are due to Alf Noble for his whole hearted assistance in supplying information. His recollections are the only living first hand record of the firm in the 1920's and 30's. They bring to life an account that is otherwise only derived from documents and family tradition, important as these are. The assistance of Bob and Cyril Parsons in providing information and documents, and clarifying various questions, has been crucial. Thanks are also due to Dianne Parsons, Connie Parsons and Olwen Ford for their encouragement, and to the Living Museum of the West for the printing.

As this account is far from complete, being really in the nature of work in progress, I am only too conscious of gaps and possible inaccuracies and I take full responsibility for these. Unless otherwise attributed I must also take the credit or blame for any opinions contained in the text.

P.R.P.

Trentham, May 1988

"YOU won't reach twenty-one if you stay here in Manchester!" was the doctors advice to the young Edmund (Ted) Parsons as the 1870's drew to a close.

So high was the level of pollution in the great English coal-powered industrial centre in the mid-nineteenth century that one of the young man's lungs had collapsed and the other was showing signs of going the same way.

Born in Manchester in 1855, the son of Henry Parsons, silk weaver, and Eleanor (née Organ), Ted reflected on the choices open to him: to await an early death, or to attempt to fend it off by emigrating to a warmer, clearer climate.

He was not entirely without prospects. Having served his time as an apprentice Hair Drafter he had the means of earning a livelihood. This trade, now virtually obsolete, supplied the brush- and broomware industry with hair graded in quality, colour and length, and curled hair (for resilience) to the upholstery and mattress industry, using horse- and cow hair, and pig bristles, as raw materials.

The greatest obstacle faced by Ted in emigrating to Australia, the price of the fare, was overcome when the horse he had bet on came home at the races.

* * * * *

In about 1885 Ted arrived as a journeyman in Sydney where he worked at his trade for twelve months at Laycock's, a hair drafting firm. That he was not especially flush was shown when he had to borrow 2/6 from Laycock to replace his straw boater lost on Sydney Harbour. A story that has come down through the family is that because Ted was a tradesman (Hair Drafter) and Laycock and his staff were all self-taught, Laycock said to Ted "If you start up in business here in Sydney I'll go broke." Ted agreed not to compete in Sydney and later kept his word.

The young man arrived at a time when the colonies had enjoyed three decades of increasing prosperity. In addition to their rich primary production of gold and wool in particular, manufacturing industry was growing strongly: by 1890 secondary production was ten times what it had been in 1860¹. Manufacturing growth was especially strong in Victoria, due not so much to Victorian tariff policy as to costs incurred on imports by freight charges, according to Shaw.² Perhaps the industrial basis laid down in the

servicing of the deep-lead mining of Ballarat and Bendigo also contributed. In any case secondary industry employed twenty-five per cent more in Victoria than in New South Wales by 1890.³

* * * * *

Perhaps these factors also influenced Ted, for in 1887 he established his own business, in Melbourne, in partnership with Richard Lewis. After moving between a number of different locations around the city the Parsons & Lewis factory was finally established at the Anderson's Road, Braybrook site in the 1890's.⁴

In 1887 Ted was living at 120 Little Oxford Street, Collingwood.⁵ This may have been the residence and workshop of Lewis. The partnership of Parsons & Lewis is first recorded in the Sands & McDougall Directory for 1888. It continued to operate at Victoria Street, Carlton, between Drummond and Rathdowne Streets, until 1890 according to the Directory. The business was described as "Wholesale and retail manufacturing, and importers of curled hair, brush materials, etc."⁶

In 1889 Ted married Emily Dean at Richmond, where her family had settled after arriving from London in 1883.⁷ Having established the new venture in a mood of optimism Ted rapidly found himself faced by another crisis: three years of economic depression set in, triggered by drought, falling wool prices, and land speculation, culminating in the crash of 1891. Nineteen of the twenty-eight banks proper then in Australia suspended or failed.⁸ Forty per cent of the factories in Melbourne's north western suburbs closed between 1890 and 1895 (from 219 to 131). The metal working shops along the Yarra and Maribyrnong Rivers was the "main industrial disaster area."⁹ Although the crisis was over by 1893, depression remained virtually to the turn of the century. In Victoria, where the depression hit hardest, the Age of 2 January 1898 reported that

"Public works became a thing of the past and the spending of the country, public and private, was stopped....With this sudden drying up of the wage fund came destitution in many ranks and depression in all. Stagnation lay on the land....it blocked everything and...would not move on."¹⁰

* * * * *

The fledgeling business and the new family managed to survive the crisis somehow. Ted was able to buy a new detached single-fronted terrace-style house at Lot 13 Morris Street by 1892. The factory was established nearby in Anderson's Road around this date.

It consisted of an oregon-framed former blacksmith's shop that was moved to the site from the corner of Barkers Road and High Street, Kew, opposite the Kew Tram Depot.

Braybrook had the advantages of cheap, flat land and its proximity to the city abattoirs at Flemington, an important source of raw materials. The Anderson's Road site, being on the bank of the Kororoit Creek, was suitable for the disposal of the large quantities of water used in processing the hair.

Richard Lewis evidently ran another part of the business at other locations: Parsons & Lewis is also recorded at 256-8 La Trobe Street, Melbourne in 1902,¹¹ and Whiteman Street, South Melbourne in 1908 and 1909.¹² Richard Lewis is listed at 120 Little Oxford Street, Collingwood in 1908 but not in 1910.¹³

A. Richard Lewis was a member of the Essington Lewis family that had been connected with the Imperial Chemical Industries (ICI) Company. He contracted Anthrax, presumably from drafting horse-hair, and died around 1909. Lewis left no descendents and either his share reverted to his partner or his family was paid out.

The business seems to continue to have been carried out at two locations, since in 1920, '21 and '22 it is listed at Charles Street, Fitzroy.¹⁴

* * * * *

Ted Parsons second son, Joseph Robert, was born 26 August 1893. His formal schooling consisted of six years at the Braybrook Junction State School.¹⁵ In 1905 he left school to work in the family business.

In 1908 the Sunshine Rail Disaster occurred when the Melbourne bound Bendigo line train loaded with picnickers collided with a stationary goods train at Sunshine Station. Forty-four people were killed and hundreds injured in what was the worlds worst rail accident at the time. Joe heard the crash and raced to the station to help. A Parsons & Lewis employee, Mick Laffan (see below) was on the platform. While they were helping Mick found the bodies of two of his sisters.

In 1912 Joe's older brother Ted Junior, who was epileptic, was drowned in the Kororoit Creek behind the factory.

When war broke out in 1914 Joseph, at 21, was required to remain at home as the business was in a Reserved Industry (as it was in the Second World War). Continuing in the business, Joe married Lilian Mary Francis in 1918.¹⁶

Less than a fortnight later in early October, Ted Parsons died after a "short sudden illness". His obituary described him as quiet, unassuming and generous, a lover of bowls, and as

having many friends as a result of his genial disposition.¹⁷ At 63 he had beaten the death sentence of his youth.

* * * * *

By 1920 Parsons & Lewis had been managed by Joe for two years, and nine men were employed at Sunshine. Five were drafters, combing and straightening hair. One man, the curler, spun hair with his offsider, the spinner's boy. A driver, a shed worker, and Joseph made up the work force.

Mick Laffan, the curler, had begun working for Ted in the Victoria Street, Carlton days (1888-90) when Mick lived at Richmond. He came with Ted to Braybrook Junction in 1890, and continued to work with the firm until his retirement at the age of eighty-five!

The spinner's boy was Alfred Noble, who started with the firm in June 1920. Alf continued to work for Parsons & Lewis in various capacities, including managing the subsidiary company Gunn & Hiskens Pty. Ltd., from 1945 until he ceased working full time in November 1977. At the time of writing, Alf still works part-time for Parsons & Lewis, having been with the firm for sixty-eight years!

When Alf first started electricity for the town including Parsons & Lewis, was supplied by H.V. McKay's Sunshine Harvester Works.

Until 1924 the firm collected raw materials and delivered orders on a lorry drawn by two horses. It was on the road for three days each week. Alf could travel the 7½ miles from Melbourne to Sunshine in an hour if he pushed the horses.

When Alf got his driver's licence in 1924 the company acquired its first mechanized transport: a Berliet lorry.

The depression of the 1930's was a lean time for Parsons & Lewis as it was for the rest of the country. By this time Joe and Lilian Parsons had four children.¹⁸ Joseph managed to keep afloat during the thirties and still had time to serve as a councillor. He was the Braybrook Shire President in 1938-39 and 1945-46, and Mayor of Sunshine in 1956.

He was a keen gardener growing prize dahlias among other things and was a founding member of the Sunshine Horticultural Society. He was active in St. Mark's Church of England and the Sunshine Technical School.

He worked in the drafting shop days, nights, weekends and holidays, and yarned with a constant stream of people passing by the open window.

His three sons, Eddy, Bob and Cyril were working in the business by 1945, and so Joseph decided to purchase the opposition:

Gunn & Hiskens Pty. Ltd. at Kensington. Joe Parsons' death in 1966 was mourned by many. Parsons Street, and the J.R. Parsons Reserve commemorate his name.

* * * * *

Joseph Parsons' first son Edmund (Eddy) was Secretary of the Kensington plant Gunn & Hiskens, from 1945 until the Brisbane branch was established in 1950. This plant, on the banks of the Brisbane River at Wynnum was managed by Eddy until its sale in 1970, when he took over a newsagency at the Brisbane suburb of Murnane. Eddy died in 1978 leaving two daughters and a son.

Bob and Cyril managed Parsons & Lewis, Sunshine after the war until the business was transferred to the Kensington plant in 1974. In 1976 the Sunshine factory and its adjoining home was demolished. At the time it was the oldest continuing business in Sunshine, and had been conducted by the same family for three generations.

The post-war years saw a number of innovations in both methods and products. Exports to Germany commenced. The use of latex spraying technology was introduced. This enabled tough resilient rubberized curled-hair to be produced for use in Holden and Volkswagen car upholstery. Competition from synthetic fibres was a constant challenge throughout this period, but up until 1988 hair was still being exported to Germany for use in Mercedes and BMW upholstery. In recent years the latex spraying technology was modified to produce coconut fibre sheeting used for mulching and erosion control by road construction and other public works authorities. In 1988 Parsons & Lewis was sold, after one hundred years of continuous operation.

NOTES

1. A.G.L. Shaw, *The Economic Development of Australia*, Melb., Longman Cheshire, Seventh ed. 1980, p.86.
2. *Ibid.*, p.86.
3. *Ibid.*, p.86.
4. The section of Anderson (the 's' was dropped somewhere along the line). Road running south from Derby Road was later renamed Graham Street. Braybrook Junction, the area west of Duke Street, was renamed 'Sunshine' in 1911 after H.V. McKay's Sunshine Harvester Works.
5. Sands & McDougall Directory of Melbourne (SMD), 1887.
6. SMD 1888, 1889, 1890.
7. Emily Amelia Dean 1868-1905, second child of Robert Henry Dean and Sophia (nee Buckel). There were eight children of whom four survived infancy: Edmund 1891-1912, Joseph Robert 1893-1966, Amelia 1898-1961, Matilda 1903-1970.
8. Shaw, *op. cit.*, p.102.
9. Graeme Davison, *The Rise and Fall of Marvellous Melbourne* (Melbourne 1978), p.65.
10. Quoted in Shaw, *op. cit.*, p.107.
11. SMD 1902.
12. *Ibid.*, 1908, 1909.
13. *Ibid.*, 1908, 1910.
14. *Ibid.*, 1920, 1921, 1922.
15. Later Sunshine Primary School
16. Lilian Mary Parsons née Francis b. Esher, England 21 November 1891, m. 21 September 1918, d. 27 July 1949. The youngest of eight children, Lilian emigrated to Australia in 19 with her brother Tom. Tom had met H.V. McKay in England and was promised a job. He became McKay's chauffeur. Lilian found work as a governess, looking after McKay's children. She was courted by Joseph whilst she was working for Judge Hood at Macedon. Joe travelled in his jinker, spending the night at the half way point on the Melbourne side of Gisborne.
17. *Sunshine Advocate*, October 1918.
18. Edmund Francis (1919-1977), Robert Eric (1921-), Cyril Joseph (1922-), Mrs. Dorothy Miller (1928-).

SIXTY-EIGHT YEARS WITH PARSONS & LEWIS

A.R. NOBLE

These notes were compiled by Peter Parsons during conversations with Alf Noble at Kensington in March and May 1988. Alf managed Gunn & Hiskens for Parsons & Lewis from 1945 to 1977, and is still working part-time with the firm in 1988.

* * * * *

My family came to Sunshine in 1915 and I became friendly with Joe Parsons, who was nine years older than me.

I remember seeing Ted (Edmund Parsons) when I was visiting Joe. He was short and was always working at the drafting bench. Joe never used to speak of him in all the time I knew him.

Things were very tough when I first knew Joe. The business was not really prosperous, and Joe had to work overtime in order to get a horse and cart for himself. He used to run to Sunshine station to get the mail in order to get warm.

I started working for Parsons & Lewis in June 1920. Just to get the place working properly Joe and I had to do unpaid work such as concreting at nights and weekends.

At this time Parsons & Lewis concentrated mainly on drafting for the brushware industry. Spinning ropes to make curled hair for the upholstery trade was done only to use the waste from drafting. There was a lot of this, and as time went by Joe increased production of curled hair in order to get a foothold in the market.

Mick Laffan, who had started with Ted in Carlton before 1890 was the curler, or spinner. He had done his time as an apprentice, presumably under Ted, and I started as the Spinner's boy.

In about November 1923 the driver left abruptly. I had driven a fruit cart to the market in my previous job, so Joe asked me if I could take over the two-horse lorry. I did, and Joe followed me around from call to call by telephone to see that I was O.K. The horses were so well trained that I just had to turn their heads in the right direction that they would go to the right door and stop.

In May 1924 I got my licence and Joe bought the firm's first commercial vehicle, a French Berliet. We had the rear of the body cut off and replaced by a tray by Till's Body Builders in Elizabeth Street, Melbourne. Occasionally I used to take the boys to Geelong for the day in it. We paid Joe £1 to use it.

I drove for three days each week picking up raw materials and supplies, buying, taking orders, and delivering. I did all the driving until Cyril took over in 1940.

* * * * *

Gunn & Hiskens Pty. Ltd. were one of Parsons & Lewis' main Melbourne competitors. The business was established when Gunn, a mattress maker from England, and A.V. Hiskens met at one of Melbourne's Clubs.

Arthur Vaughan Hiskens had a lot of go. He was Secretary of Williamstown Racecourse and owned Moonee Valley Racecourse. There is a story that he learned to ride a horse in order to court his future wife, Miss Cox. The Cox Plate is named after her brother and Hiskens himself still has a race named after him.

In any case they built the factory on the corner of Stubbs and Parsons Streets, Kensington. The original timber and corrugated iron factory was destroyed by fire and the stables and coach house has been demolished, but the brick office and workshop are still in use.

The most obvious remnant of Gunn & Hiskens' past however is a large crumbling structure of dark rooms and passages, its few windows guarded by inch-thick iron bars set in the wall, covering almost a quarter of an acre. In many places the concrete facing has fallen away from the twelve inch thick walls, exposing the bluestone and brick rubble material used in the building's construction.

Perhaps Gunn & Hiskens fared well from supplying upholstery material for domestic and war productions during the First World War for this major expansion of capital investment occurred during 1920. The work is said to have been done by labourers from Moonee Valley Racecourse.

* * * * *

During the twenties Gunn & Hiskens controlled a large part of the curled hair market, whilst Parsons & Lewis continued to emphasize production for the brushware industry, and continued to struggle through the twenties. The 1929 crash and its aftermath were endured by reducing hours rather than labour at Parsons & Lewis.

As the 1930's wore on business recovered for both businesses. Joe Parsons' policy of increasing production of curled hair began to pay off and finally set Parsons & Lewis on its feet.

Curled horsehair was the traditional material used in all upholstery. The "over stuffed" furniture of the Victorian era was

filled with curled horsehair, and was made by the horsehair spinner, or curler. This trade is now obsolete as production has been mechanized for some decades. The Parsons & Lewis files contain the Indentures of an apprentice to the "Animal Hair Curling (Spinning)" trade dated 1949. Another document, dated 1963, indentures an apprentice to the trade of "Hair Drafter (Drafting of Animal Hair for the Brushware Trade)". These are probably the last documents of that kind.

As well as domestic upholstery a significant section of the curled hair market required material for other purposes. It was a component for example in air conditioners and oil filters. The transport industry consumed vast quantities: railway carriage and coach seating, saddlery, shipping seating and bedding, motor car upholstery, and aeroplane seating. (During the Second World War Parsons & Lewis were called on to provide curled hair to replace inflammable Australian aeroplane upholstery). The first Australian Parliament House seating used Parsons & Lewis curled hair inside leather upholstery, green for the House of Representatives and red for the Senate. In the 1960's this upholstery was replaced. Parsons & Lewis successfully tendered for the old upholstery and recycled it.

* * * * *

At its height Gunn & Hiskens produced ten tons of curled hair each week, the combined efforts of 14 machine spinners and one hand spinner.

After the death of A.V. Hiskens in the late 1930's however, Gunn & Hiskens fortunes declined. By the early 1940's production was down, conditions had deteriorated such that workers had to wear bags over their heads when working indoors in wet weather, management decisions were made (or not made) by a firm of accountants for the A.V. Hiskens estate, and Hiskens' daughters showed little interest in continuing the business.

Joe Parsons raised the question of buying the business with a Hiskens relative at a Wages Board meeting towards the end of the Second World War. The Hiskens daughters were glad to get rid of it.

I went to Kensington with Joe one day to look it over. Joe said to me "Do you think you can run it?" I said I could if he gave me a free hand with it. Joe said "You run it as you see fit, brother," and he bought it for £2038 on 4 September 1945.

* * * * *

We kept the existing staff on. Over the years there were some characters.

A chap named Harold Vick refused to do what I told him one morning. We had words and I sacked him. That afternoon he came up to me and said "Eh, forget what we said this morning, and I'll overlook it this time." He stayed. There was an aboriginal who was a good worker, but he got on the drink and landed in jail. He came back afterwards but I had had to replace him. Spike Moloney was an alcoholic who was a good worker in between sessions. There was a boiler worker who came to work dressed in a suit and tie: he didn't last long.

One time I heard a commotion and I raced into the workshop to find one Italian chasing another brandishing a pair of razor-sharp shears (the same sort as those used for shearing sheep). Without thinking I got in his way and bumped him and he fell head-first into a tub of hair that was soaking and hadn't yet been cleaned. It was only later that I realized I could have been seriously hurt.

Ray Flint had been a boxer. Squizzy Taylor ("The Turk") managed him for John Wren. He had a bit of trouble knowing when he was supposed to throw his fights. When he worked for Gunn & Hiskens he was a bit punchy: you'd come round the corner and he'd be shaping up to you.

* * * * *

Joe's mother's people lived and worked at South Melbourne - his uncle worked in one of the big timberyards there. He used to take Joe to the football - he followed South Melbourne. When Joe married Lil she began going too and became a keen South Melbourne supporter. I used to go with them too before I was married in 1930. I used to go everywhere with them: swimming, flower shows, the city, the football. During the years when Joe was building up the business he wouldn't leave the drafting bench, and he often got me to take her where she had to go, or do odd jobs around the house. He took me under his wing and respected my judgement. He always called me "brother".

Lil was tall, easy going and a good person. When she was dying I couldn't leave I thought so much of her.

* * * * *

