

TEBBS CANVAS PRODUCTS – 50 YEARS ON

The country's biggest supplier of canvas annexes and awnings is 50 years old this year.

Since the dawn of the Australian caravan industry in the 1950s, Tebbs Canvas Products Pty Ltd of Victoria has made annexes and awnings, and over five decades has also been involved in the manufacture and supply of aluminium annexes, tents, camping equipment and domestic blinds and awnings.

Still family owned and operated, three generations of the Tebb family including the company founder, Charlie Tebb, are now steering the business to a new future in materials and accessory wholesaling for the camping industry.

Tebbs had a most unusual and chance beginning in the immediate post-war years. After four and a half years with the 9th Division in the Middle East and later Borneo, Charlie Tebb returned home to start a French polishing business, operating from a single stall at the Dandenong Market.

One day a market patron asked Charlie if he hired out tents. We can only wonder why anyone would think a French polisher would have a supply of tents hidden away when all materials were in desperately short supply. However it was this chance inquiry that soon afterwards led Charlie to purchase a single canvas tent at a local auction. The next day Charlie Tebb demonstrated a gift for opportunism when he erected, at the front of his market stall, a sign which said, 'Tents for Hire'. Tebbs Canvas Products was operational.

Charlie Tebb began scouring local

auctions and markets for tents and tarps and eventually picked up an old industrial sewing machine. Within months he became established as the local supplier of canvas goods, and the rising demand required him to convert his chook sheds at home into a small factory, using rolled out kerosine tins for the walls. The French polishing business would have to wait – forever, as it would turn out.



Mr Charlie Tebb.

In 1954 Charlie Tebb registered his company as Tebbs Canvas Products and moved to a factory on the Princes Highway in Dandenong.

Tebbs produced awnings and blinds for local businesses and started wholesaling canvas products, including tents, for wider distribution. In the '60s the wholesale business started to boom as Australians began their love affair with recreational camping and caravanning.

It was also in the '60s that Tebbs opened a small retail camping store in Langhorn street, Dandenong. The store became a valuable adjunct to the Tebbs business and was run by the Tebbs family for over 20 years before the doors were closed for the last time in the 1980s.

Following in his father's footsteps, Des Tebb joined the family business in 1964, and in 1973 he was followed by his brother-in-law, John Armstrong. By this time caravan sales had peaked at almost 39,000 units a year, and Tebbs were there to meet the explosion in demand for canvas annexes and awnings. Five years later the company was employing 75 people and had grown to be Australia's biggest supplier of custom built canvas caravan annexes. Tebbs sales staff, on the road, offered a complete measure and quote and installation service.

The 1980s saw the advent of aluminium annexes and Tebbs included these in its range until 1989. More

exciting developments in synthetic materials, and cotton/synthetic blends provided lightweight materials with high water resistance. With the canvas industry becoming more specialised, Tebbs decided to remain with the caravan and camping industry and leave the heavy transport market for other suppliers.

Last year marked the 25th year of Tebbs' association with the Victorian caravan industry body, the CTIA. Des Tebb has been a CTIA Committee member for eight years, and for the past five has been Chairman of its sub committee formed to manage the development and staging of the 4WD, Caravan and Camping Leisurfest. Des' daughter Kellie joined the company full time in 1994.

Charlie Tebb, now aged 75, is still active in the management of the business he founded 50 years ago. He and his company are looking forward to the next century and the many changes to the camping industry which will no doubt arise, bringing new opportunities and challenges for this industry leader.

CARAVAN WORLD'S LATEST COMPETITION

We're delighted to announce the start of our 'Win an A'Van' competition this month. Full details and an entry coupon for this exciting opportunity can be found on pages 88 and 89, and will be repeated in the November and December issues.

For those who wish to take advantage of the offer of bonus entries by taking out a subscription, this issue also contains extra coupons in the form of bound-in and loose inserts. Please use one of these if you are among the many people who hate to mutilate their magazine – or hand them to friends or family members who may be interested in subscribing and entering the draw.