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## Brian has a tale to tell

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# Brian has a tale to tell

THE Toy Factory at Gumeracha, located behind the Big Rocking Horse, holds a special place in many people's hearts.

But, for Resthaven Port Elliot resident Mr Brian Harvey, 94, the property holds an even greater significance.

His family once owned the factory, using it as a facility to dry potatoes for the troops in World War II, and then subsequently, to dry and glaze fruit.

"When I was growing up, Mum and Dad owned a farm at Kersbrook where we grew apples, cherries, plums, peaches – everything," Brian said.

"Our business was CP Harvey and Son, and we would take the fruit to the market once a week.

"Any produce that was not quite up to scratch, we would dry and then sell as dried fruit.

"We made the most of what we had grown, and what was available.

"My dad didn't like to waste anything," he said.

When World War II broke out, the Australian government contacted Brian's dad and asked if the family could also dry slices of potato, which could be shipped to the troops out on the battlegrounds.

"At Kersbrook, we had no access to power," Brian said.

"So, we looked for a new property that would allow us to meet the demand of the new work."

The 10-acre site at Gumeracha was purchased for £1,700 and the family moved in on 1 July 1940.

By November, they had sent off their first shipment of dried potatoes.

"We started with a wood-fired furnace, which we had to fuel from trees that were chopped from the surrounding scrubland," Brian says.

"It took around 1,000 tonne of wood a year to run the furnace."

To make the product, the potatoes were first agitated in a drum to remove the skins.

They were then dipped into a sulphate solution to stop them discolouring.

Next, they made their way up the conveyor belt where they were sliced to around ¼ inch thick, and then through a conveyor belt tunnel where hot air from the furnace would blow over the slices to remove the moisture and dry them out.

"It took around one week to get the potato slices ready for packaging," Brian said.

"We had to get the moisture level down to 5&percnt;."

Next, they were placed into 4-gallon tins, and it was Brian's job, when he got home from school, to solder the lids closed to prevent air from getting in.

Two of these tins were packaged together and then the shipment was sent to Port Adelaide where it was transported to the Australian Army, stationed in the Philippines.

The business also sent shipments to the United States Army when they were stationed in the Philippines, under General McArthur.

Because of this connection, an American captain came to visit the factory around this time.

"He was from California and had been involved in dried fruit over there," Brian says.

He said "If we're both still alive at the end of all of this, then I'll come and teach you how to make glaze fruit."

When the war ended, true to his word, Brian received instruction from the American Captain on how to make the glaze fruit.

He was impressed with the product.

"The glaze fruit was beautiful to eat," Brian says.

"And it was very popular, but there wasn't a



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lot of profit in it because everything had to be done by hand.”

Despite this labour intensity, the business grew well, with CP Harvey and Son products being sent to Italy and England, as well as being sold locally.

As time went on, Brian and his wife Joan (who he met at school and whose mother worked at the factory) took over the business, and they rebuilt the factory to better cater to staff and business needs.

The couple had four children during this time, and Joan also went into nursing at the Gumeracha hospital.

At the factory, the work was demanding, the margins slim, and Brian also had the problem that he had become very allergic to bees, which were attracted to the fruit and sugar.

“I had to always have medicine with me,” Brian says.

“Sometimes I would get stung many times a day.

“The writing was on the wall about needing to get into something else.”

Brian's hand was forced in the end when one of his customers filed for bankruptcy after he had taken receipt of a large quantity of goods.

“We had filled a very large order from them on the Friday, and the following Thursday we heard from a solicitor in town that their business was no longer solvent,” Brian said.

“We scraped together enough money to pay our growers and workers, but in the end, we had to sell a lot of the equipment and factory goods to make ends meet.

“I don't regret it though, at least I can sleep at night knowing we did the right thing by those who depended on us.”

Looking for a new direction, Brian and Joan bought a dairy farm in Birdwood, complete with 60 cows.

“It was a bit of a struggle to get the loan for the property as we only had \$1,000 to our names at that stage,” Brian said.

“But we managed, and I took on extra work at Chapman's Bacon Factory to earn a bit more to help pay things off.”

Brian started his days at 3am, milking the cows.

Joan would get the kids packed off to school on the bus, and would then feed the calves, while Brian went off to do an 8-hour shift at Chapman's.

“It was hard work, but we managed,” Brian said.

Over time, the couple increased the dairy business from around 56 litres of milk a day, to 30,000 litres.

“We purchased the adjoining 80-acre block to house the additional cows and we were living pretty well self-sufficiently off the land, eating rabbits and chickens, as well as making use of the butter, cream and milk

that came from the dairy.

Then, when he was around 50 years old, and still maintaining the same routine, Brian's appendix burst, rupturing into his bowel, and causing a great deal of pain and problems.

He was rushed to the regional hospital (in the back of a Holden station wagon because an ambulance was not available) and operated on late on a Friday night.

When the surgeon visited the hospital on Monday morning, he discovered that Brian had incorrectly been moved to a smaller hospital and that his wound had not been sufficiently taken care of.

As a result, it became infected, and Joan was told that Brian was not expected to live.

But, after three and a half months in hospital, much of that spent with tubes running down his throat, Brian was able to walk with assistance and was slowly back on his feet.

“I was out of action for around a year all up,” he said.

“And for much of it we didn't know what was going to happen next.

“Joan and I made the decision to sell the dairy.”

They were able to find a cash buyer and the couple cleared their debt to the bank.

Brian and Joan bought a smaller property at Balhannah, and Brian went back to Chapman's as an odd jobs man doing ‘the dirtiest jobs you



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could be given.'

But, it wasn't long before he was tapped on the shoulder by George Chapman and put in charge of the pickled pork.

"We used to do 3 tonnes of corned beef a day, along with 5 tonnes of leg ham and 5 tonnes of pressed ham," Brian said.

Then from October, the production would ramp up for Christmas, and I would be working six days a week, producing 1,000 legs of ham each day in the lead-up to Christmas.

"That's a lot of ham."

Brian left Chapman's in the 1980s and he and Joan moved to Victor Harbor, running a small caravan accommodation business.

"When we started out, we had three caravans – one at Adare Caravan Park, another at Port Elliot and the third at Victor Harbor caravan park," Brian said.

"Within five years we had grown the business to 15 caravans.

Joan would do the cleaning, and would always leave a nice posey of flowers for the guests.

"In the end, we sold that business to one of our clients."

Sadly, Joan died in 2018, Brian having nursed her through three years of dementia.

She was a resident at Resthaven Port Elliot.

Brian moved into the home in 2022.

"I can't speak highly enough of this place – it's just phenomenal," Brian said.

"The way it is kept, always clean and smelling great.

It is a wonderful place and I feel lucky to be here.'

Reflecting back on his life, Brian says he has had his ups and downs.

"It's been an interesting life," Brian says.

"I've had great opportunities and I've met some interesting people.

"There were certainly times when I didn't know what I was going to do next, but I've enjoyed it all.'



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Resthaven Port Elliot resident Brian Harvey certainly has a story to tell.