

The place for a 'kid' starting out

Many Warrnambool households have been associated with the Fletcher Jones 'family' during the past 50 years, including long-time employee Glen Barker.

By JACINTA EVANS

IN the boom years when Fletcher Jones rose to glory as a household name, an enthusiastic 14-year-old landed a job on the factory floor.

It was 1954 when Warrnambool lad Glen Barker joined Fletcher Jones and Staff Pty Ltd, an era when almost everyone wore a Fletcher Jones suit, and almost every Warrnambool home was associated in some way with the icon.

With a staff of several hundred in those good old days and a total city population of just over 10,000, it was inevitable that someone in the family would end up becoming part of the great FJ family.

If you were productive and worked hard, you were rewarded with a good dollar. This was the place to be in the 1950s. And what a booming place this turned out to be for "the kid" called Glen.

Good money, a bonus system, a generous boss — and he found a bride in the mail order room along the way — was enough to keep Glen Barker loyal to the FJ name for the rest of his working life.

Forty-five years on, you could now say Glen Barker knows the business of pressing inside out.

In 1999, he's the longest serving employee working at the Warrnambool factory and wants to be the company's longest serving employee ever.

Times have changed — the factory floor is occupied by around one-tenth of the workers it was in the 1950s, 60s and 70s — but he hasn't forgotten those early years.

"I was 14 at the time, started work at eight in the morning and worked through 'til 10 at night. I was underpressing side seams in the trousers and pockets, those days I used to get about 800 done a day in after sales."

"I went on to press trousers for 37 years. Came to know it inside out."

"Could leg-press 500 trousers a day," he boasts, while admitting quietly that his energy didn't ever extend to the ironing board on the home front.

Starting on the base wage, Glen was earning four pound, four and sixpence, the equivalent of \$8-\$9 in today's currency. But the Fletcher Jones bonus system gave workers the chance to double, even triple their earnings.

Glen soon embraced this concept of bonuses and found he always had a quid in his pocket. "The bonus system was an opportunity to make good money."

"My father was earning 13 pound a week delivering bread."

"I was only a kid and was probably bringing home about 40 pound a week, equivalent to about \$80. Three times the basic wage. I was their bloody top worker."

Those were the days. With a quid in the back pocket, Glen used his new-found wealth to travel the countryside when he had time off work, holidaying in such far off places as Adelaide.

"Things were good in them days. At Christmas old Fletcher gave us all presents ... car fridges, deckchairs, towels. It was very nice."

"There was always a big Christmas party out on the lawns, trains and horse and carts, you name it, he had it out there."

In fact all of the staff — as many as 1200 in the peak times — at the Warrnambool factory received a gift from FJ each Christmas.

Glen has never forgotten the time his bonus bonanza came to a temporary halt when the manager of the day told him he was earning too much money. "You're earning more than what I earn, he told me. So I went back to five pound a week in the cutting room."

"I was there about nine months, and he came back and said: 'We'll have to bring you back down there, there's too much work'."

"So I went back and started making money again."

The place of Fletcher Jones in Glen Barker's life is pivotal, and he obviously values the lifestyle the industry and the icon have given his family. "There wouldn't be many houses around Warrnambool which didn't have a member of the family at Fletchers."

"I've worked here all my life, me mother and brother worked here, son, daughter and son-in-law worked here. Son Rodney and son-in-law Ray Hardwick still work here."

And as you might expect, Glen met his wife Heather at FJ's. "She was down from Beaufort, working in the mail order department in those days."

"A lot of girls worked here in the factory. There was a hell of a lot of people here then."

Fletcher Jones, the man, overcame many obstacles, including a poor education, war experiences, a stutter and tough economic times to become a successful entrepreneur. Fletcher Jones remains an icon in the eyes of Glen Barker. "You'd see him down the street and I used to wonder how he knew you with so many people working here. He never forgot a face."

"He'd always put the wind up people when he came into the factory. Nice man, but tough."

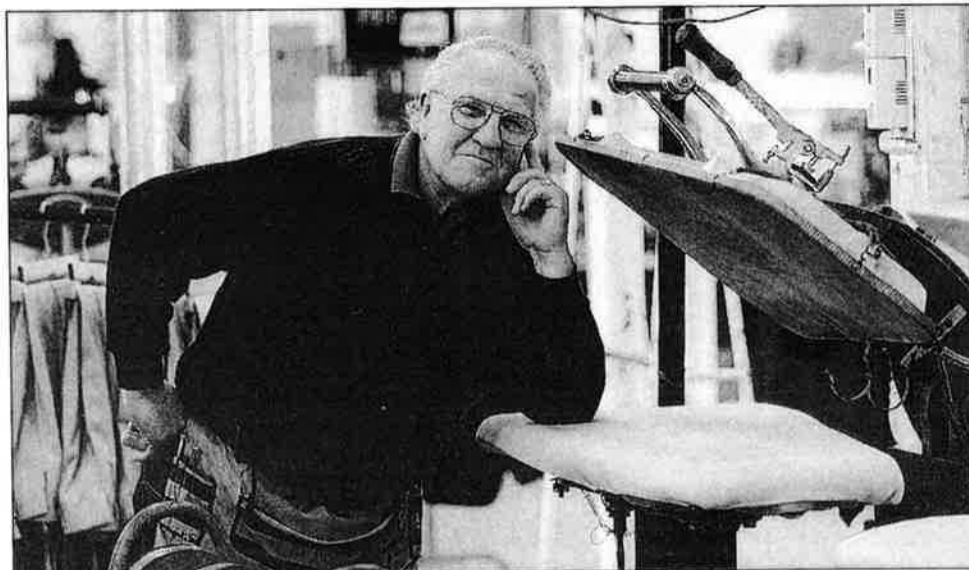
Fletcher Jones' generosity shines through as long-time employees talk about the man.

Glen tells the story of the time when FJ flew to Adelaide on a business trip in his own private plane, the Warrnamboolian, and returned to Warrnambool with a load of Easter buns for all his employees — more than 1000 at the time.

"He thought they were beautiful buns, so he brought back enough for everybody."

Glen remembers FJ driving a maroon Rover to work from his large and stylish brick residence a short distance from the Fletcher Jones' Pleasant Hill factory site in Raglan Parade. The house remains in Verdon Street. FJ also lived in Jamieson Street and Floral Place.

"He was always immaculate in a suit, with a handkerchief in his pocket. Always used to



Glen Barker started out at the Fletcher Jones factory as a "kid", sometimes earning three times the basic wage. He has devoted his entire working life to the Fletcher Jones factory in Warrnambool. Picture: GLEN WATSON. 991005GW25

have a fairly nice looking shirt that always caught your eye. He wore a lot of checked shirts."

"There was no alcohol allowed on the premises, and he was quite religious. He was the silent sponsor of the 3YB hymn of the day played at 7.30 every morning."

There was a time, amid tough economic conditions in about 1964, that FJ called his employees together. The workers feared the worst. Instead, to their astonishment, FJ announced the factory would not only keep producing, but would begin working overtime four nights a week.

His rationale was that when the economy lifted — his prediction was that it would improve later in that year — the warehouse would be full of stock ready for sale, while competitors would be unable to keep up with orders.

Glen Barker remembers that as FJ pre-

dicted, the tide turned later that year and all the stock in FJ's warehouse was sold.

Now struggling amid an environment created by the lifting of tariff protection, staff numbers have gradually dwindled down to just over 100 at the Warrnambool factory.

Throughout the times of downsizing and staff cuts, Glen has always resisted the temptation to move on. "Why should I? FJ's has always been good to me, I've reared the kids ... it gets a bit cold here, but no, I'd never leave."

Now a storeman and packer and close to 60, Glen's days of breaking records in the pressing room are over. But there's one more record he has his eye on. "I'd like to make 50 years. Got to have a goal to keep going."

"In 1954 I never thought I would be still here in 1999. It's the only challenge I've got left now."

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