

Around the Trade

By EVA WILAND
Associate editor

Supermarket pioneer George Owens, who founded Savemores, one of Australia's first self service grocery chains, has died after a long and fruitful life, aged 90.

Mr Owens created the Newcastle-based chain in the 1950s, which, by 1977, was operating 28 food and liquor stores and food barns between Taree, on the mid north coast of NSW, and Gosford, on the central coast.

Savemores' beginnings date from 1909 when Mr Owens' father Richard bought the general store at Wollombi, in the NSW Hunter region, with one-third of the winnings from a lottery.

The general store was typical for its day - six metres by 20 metres, and located in front of the family residence.

When George Owens was 11 years-old, the family moved to Newcastle, north of Sydney, where they bought another general store, at Islington.

Richard Owens died in 1929, aged 54, leaving George and his two brothers, William and Arthur, at a tender age to carry on the business he had started.

They expanded the operation by taking over many bankrupt businesses in the Newcastle region during the depression.

At 23, George was managing one store and supervising another five. By 1939, he was doing the buying and controlling for all the 17 stores owned by the family.

As a result of his vision, the business was converted to the Savemores chain of self service supermarkets, despite opposition from some members of the family.

George's own son Richard - the former managing director of BI-LO and now head of Richard Owens Investments - told FOODWEEK his father worked seven days a week until late every evening to determine prices, range, store layout and advertising for the new chain to make sure the concept succeeded.

He said his father also was possibly a pioneer of co-operative advertising in Australia.

It was one of the successful strategies he implemented which helped grow the business rapidly.

TURBULENT TIMES: The business continued to grow under George's management, despite turbulent times behind the scenes.

This was caused mainly by the next generation entering the business, resulting in conflict between George and his two brothers.

At the time, John David, then executive chairman of Davids Holdings and now simply a director of Davids Ltd, was a board member of the family company. He was to play an important part in the events about to unfold.

George and his brothers retired in 1975, and, in 1977, the Savemores business was split into three equal family groups.

July 28, 1998

George's two brothers and their sons took control of two, one-third shares of the business. Both businesses continued to trade under the Savemores name.

Richard built up his family's third share of the business, which was renamed Shoey's Food Barns, to become the thriving 40-store, \$250 million-a-year business Coles Myer bought in 1988.

The Savemores banner ultimately fell into obscurity in the 1980s as the stores came under different banners.

In 1986, the Savemores businesses ceased to exist when the remaining five stores owned by George's nephew Jon, and his brother-in-law, Gary Jones, were put into receivership on Davids' petition.

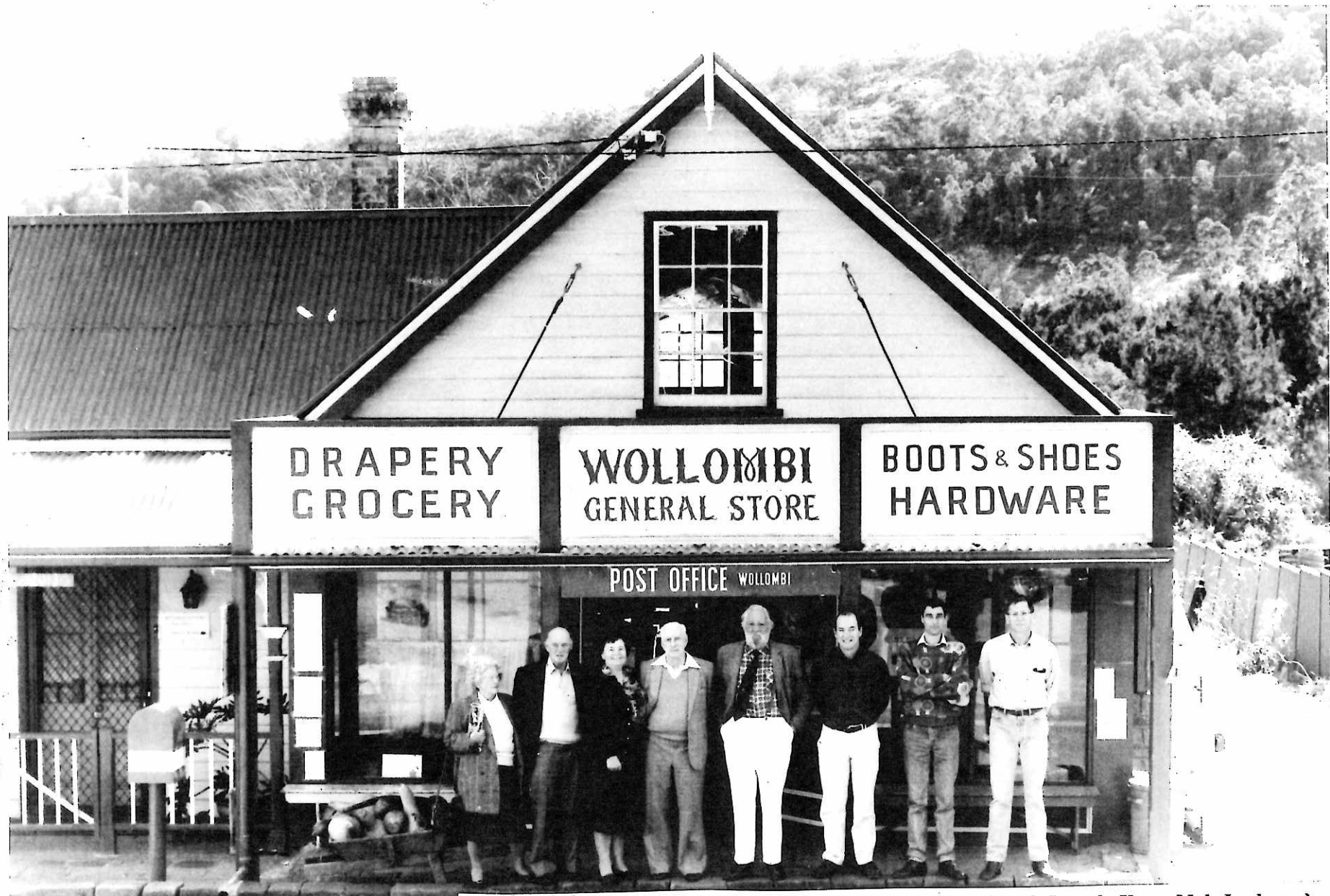
Richard's brother Donald later bought some of the liquor stores from the family holding, and still operates a chain of liquor stores in regional NSW today.

George Owens continued to chair the family's real estate group and went to his office in Newcastle three mornings a week until he died.

One of his jobs for many years was to act as "reader" of FOODWEEK for his son Richard. He would read the publication avidly and highlight articles of interest.

Richard Owens said he missed his father who was a great mate to him - "he was a wonderful father".

"The industry has lost one of its true old-time gentlemen who, at the end of his 90 years, still retained a real sense of value and fair play," he said. ♦



... Above: from left, Madge and George Owens, Muriel and Joseph Kerr, Mel Jurd, and Brian Edmonds, Peter Lawless and Ben Pocius.

THE STORE JULY 1992

ONCE THERE WAS A CORNER STORE

A History of the Owens' Family Business
1876-1995



Wollombi 1913 Mr Richard Owens First Store.

LEFT TO RIGHT . . . Mr Gil Jarrett (Postmaster) . . . William T. Owens, age 9 . . . Arthur H. Owens, age 7 . . . Shop boy . . . Grandpa Owen, born Armlwch Anglesey Wales . . . George R. Owens, age 5 . . . Mr Richard Owens . . . Miss Millie Bourne (Milliner) . . . Miss Lizzie Barnes (Domestic) . . . Mr Eph Walker (Carter) . . . In Horse Carriage, Mrs. Min. Jarrett