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Queensland Business Leaders Hall of Fame Fellow 2016

My project involves mapping all of the Greek food businesses that I can find in the center of Brisbane in the first half of the twentieth century.

Something like 4000 milk bars opened between 1932 and 1937.

The Greek Café is one of the Australian stories and it's got a very specific starting point, it started in 1878 and it lasted about a hundred years, so by the 1960s they were starting to die out. So very few people in the younger generations would even know what a Greek Café is. Say Greek Café and they think a Greek Restaurant, these were absolutely not restaurants that sold Greek food. They had very British food. Hamburgers, milk shakes, ice cream sundaes, toasted sandwiches that sort of thing.

One of the last shops and one of the really elegant shops was Christie's. So older Brisbane people will tell me about Christie's and they just talk with almost wonder about the things they had there like oyster omelets and sitting on the balcony overlooking Queen Street while they're eating really an important part of the special things they did in Brisbane.

Ice cold milkshakes served in these anodized containers. These are the kinds of malted milk dispensers proprietors used. Straw dispensers with paper straws... and this was the last word in milk shake machines – the Hamilton Beach from the 1930s.

They were quite literally like an unofficial McDonalds in the 1930s, 40s and 50s – in fact a really big part of the social fabric of Australia. But they also enabled thousands of Greek migrants to become established here – and not just established, but integrated into their communities. They were community leaders, they were business leaders, they were a really important part of Australian culture but at the same time they maintained their Greek identity and the Greek Café is right at the heart of that story.

They wouldn't have been able to operate without someone that was providing the things that they needed so Peter Samios went into that business.

The mainstay of the business was they'd go on the road, travel to a majority of all the inland towns that all had milk bars, every town had a milk bar. So the main thing they supplied were monogrammed plates, ice cream utensils, and all your flavourings. There was a lot of spinoff on what they were able to supply that wasn't available just anywhere.

He was also supplying Mediterranean foods like olive oil and things like that that Greeks couldn't get anywhere else and they're still in the business today.

It's amazing to me that these businesses thrived in the face of some of the prejudice that they suffered. Australian generally called them Dagoes even if they didn't mean that in a derogatory sense so you find advertisements from non Greek café's that will say things like "Shop here before the day goes", so

it looks like they mean shop here before the sun goes down but everybody knew what that meant.

The outcome of this project will be a significant document about the Greek food businesses in Brisbane. There is also a blog that I am writing as I am attracting some attention and I am hoping that more Brisbane residents will go online find that and they can add they're comments about their memories about Christie's and places like that.

I guess I started off by talking to people about their memories and the research process is sort of a snowballing one where one person will refer you to another person.

Once you've got some of the key names then you've got something you can go with and begin to look more deeply at a collection like the John Oxley Library and once you start doing that then you do find there are other materials there as well.

The Fellowship is a wonderful opportunity for people to just set aside some time to really delve into something so it enables you to undertake the research. It provides the space where you can work at your own pace and you can work with other fellows and you've got such great access to staff that know so much more about what's in the library than you will ever know.

When you do come across something that's really key to your research it's such a great feeling.

Acknowledgements

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