

Meet the

Klosters

The Kloster name has been synonymous with motoring in Newcastle since the 1930s. Carol Duncan discovers that the love affair with the motor car started even earlier



"The floral display in the grounds are becoming more attractive every day under the combined influence of sunshine and occasional showers. Some sixty men are engaged, under the direction of Mr August Kloster, in levelling ground, laying turf, or marking out flower plots."

(Sydney Morning Herald, Tuesday 23 September, 1879)

August Friedrich Kloster must have been extremely proud of his work. As Overseer of Sydney's Domain and Royal Botanic Gardens, one can only imagine the immense amount of preparation that went into getting the gardens and surrounds of the Garden Palace ready for the Sydney International Exhibition of 1879. Over the next seven months, more than a million people visited the exhibition to see an array of objects collected from all over the world, quite an achievement considering at the time of Federation in 1901 Sydney's population was still just 500,000.

Sadly, the spectacular Garden Palace building was destroyed by fire just three years later, along with most of the exhibits. Despite this disaster, the exhibition became the seed for Sydney's Technological Museum, now the Powerhouse Museum, and a number of the items to survive the fire are in the Powerhouse today.

Imagine being a little boy of just seven

years of age, at a time when the first practical motor vehicle is still a sparkle in the eye of Karl Benz - who was to take out his first patent in 1886. Imagine, then, that your father takes you to work with him, and you have the rare privilege of seeing one of the most powerful mechanical devices of the day. Might this mark the beginning of the Kloster family's involvement in the automotive industry in Australia?

It seems highly likely that the young Christian Henry Kloster was a regular visitor to the Sydney International Exhibition. Thanks to his father's job the Kloster family lived in Domain Lodge, so the surrounding gardens and Garden Palace were his backyard. And what a backyard! How many seven-year-old boys could resist skiving off to take in the amazing sights and sounds of the opulent Garden Palace.

"The engine which was started on Thursday by the Governor was one of five, aggregating 180 horsepower. This engine was of novel design, recently invented and patented, and gained the only gold medal in its

Harry Kloster's original passport shows him to be a very well travelled man for the time



class at the late Paris exhibition." (SMH, Tuesday 23 September, 1879)

By 1888, Christian (Harry) Kloster was working for wool exporters Dalgety & Co, and in time became manager of the company's fledgling car import business. In 1897 Australian innovators had already experimented with building their own vehicles - one was described as "terrifying" - but a company already experienced in import/export was in prime position to enter the market. By the early 1900s, British and European car-makers such as Enfield and Daimler were well on their way, and these, along with US-made vehicles, were imported into Australia. In 1909, mass production of the car became a reality, and by 1917 a flood of cars was flowing into the country. In that year alone 15,000 were imported: 10,000 Model T Fords, 2300 Dodges, 1500 Buicks and 1200 from other manufacturers.

In 1919, Harry founded Standardised Motors Ltd, considered to be Sydney's finest car showroom. He was also busy developing a Dodge assembly plant at Ashfield, a wise move as problems were looming for importers. Automobiles were becoming more affordable and more

widely available, and the Australian government introduced a customs duty on imported vehicle bodies. This measure was partly an attempt to encourage growth of a local automotive industry, but was also motivated by the desire to reduce the vast amount of space being taken up on ships by imported vehicles, at the expense of other goods. Harry Kloster disagreed with this position, stating in the SMH: "Until such time as our community is large enough to warrant local manufacture, our government

in selling cars, but in selling cheap and economic transportation. We in Australia are still dependent upon the primary products for our substantial existence, and there is a vast store of wealth waiting to be produced by working the soil. Yet our legislators choose to close their eyes to the obvious encouragement that should be extended to farmers and settlers by making cheaper transportation possible - at present withheld or restricted by tariff measures." (SMH, Thursday, 19 July, 1924)

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Christian (Harry) Kloster, 1924

should turn their attention to reducing the present limitations imposed on the importation of motor vehicles."

In 1924, Harry went to the United States to see the potential of the burgeoning automotive industry for himself:

"Mr C. H. Kloster, who recently returned from an extended visit to the USA, supplies some useful information in respect to motor transport in that country. 'In America,' he states, 'the idea that a motor car is a luxury has long since died a natural death, and the average taxpayer regards the possession of a car as merely necessary in his daily activity, whilst those interested in the trade have almost forgotten the pleasurable side of motoring, and concentrate their efforts not

As motoring became more affordable, and more popular, organisations were created to represent the interests of enthusiasts. In 1903 the Australian Motoring Association was formed in New South Wales, South Australia and Victoria. At this stage, automobiles were still very expensive novelties that only the 'well-off' could afford. But by 1924, the number of car owners had grown to the point that the Australian Automobile Association was formed as the 'voice of Australian motoring' - it remains so to this day.

Fast-forward to the early 1930s, and Harry had already spotted an opportunity to branch out in Newcastle. Kloster Limited opened for business at 335 Hunter Street,

as sole distributors for Ford vehicles in Newcastle and the surrounding district. The showpiece of the opening was the new English 'de-luxe' Ford, which hadn't yet been released for sale to the public. It could be yours starting from £248! Back then, BHP had only been in operation for 20 years and was already the region's largest employer. A growing customer base was now served by an automotive retail pioneer.

Harry moved the business into larger premises in Darby Street, Newcastle, within the first year of operation. Shortly afterwards, it expanded further to the site in Tudor Street, Hamilton, where the business included reconditioning and used vehicles.

For Harry, this early entry into a spectacularly successful new industry established an immensely strong base which his son, Harley Austin Christian Kloster, would later use to innovate and expand beyond the family's Sydney base. Harley was born in 1909; sadly, his grandfather, August, hadn't lived to see the start of the Kloster family's success. He had died in 1884, the year after his beautiful gardens were damaged in the massive fire that destroyed the Garden Palace.

In 1938, a society wedding took place at Newcastle's grand Christchurch Cathedral, when Harley married a young Newcastle woman, Joffre Brown. The ceremony was followed by a reception at the Great Northern Hotel, then in its glorious prime.

After Harry's death in 1945, his son Geoffrey Walter Kloster initially took over the business, but his tenure was to be short-lived. When Geoffrey died just a year later >>



The original press announcement from the Herald, and the Darby Street showroom as it looked in the '50s

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The Tudor Street site as it was in the early '50s



Flying spare parts from Broadmeadow, circa 1948



Harley Kloster, and his wife Joffre, aboard his boat

"Harley Kloster would surely be chuffed to think that the company is now in the hands of people who feel that they are a part of the Kloster family."

the Kloster firm moved into Harley's hands.

And so a new era began - one which saw the expansion of the Kloster parts division supplying Ford spares as far as Moree and Dubbo, and from the Hawkesbury to the Queensland border. This service wasn't even interrupted by the devastating Maitland floods of 1955, and inland in 1956, which cut off towns and paralysed commerce to the north and west of Newcastle. Unperturbed, Harley chartered light aircraft to make daily flights from the Royal Newcastle Aero Club airfield at Broadmeadow, to wherever was necessary for the next six weeks. Harley also oversaw the introduction of finance and insurance services to Kloster Pty Ltd and was an innovator in offering to handle all of the customers' personal negotiations from within the Hamilton centre.

By 1966 business was really booming, the Hamilton centre sprawled over a two-acre site and was considered a world-class facility, with 36 vehicle service bays - the largest of its kind in NSW. 1966 was also the year a RAAF Sabre jet crashed at The Junction, killing the pilot Flying Officer Warren William Goddard. Goddard knew he had engine trouble, and had been trying to steer his jet out to sea when it crashed.

Meanwhile, Harley's eldest son Michael

Augustus Christian Kloster had been sent to Sydney's prestigious Kings School, and later graduated from the University of Sydney with a degree in Economics. In the 1960s he worked as a stockbroker in Sydney, but in 1967 took over the management of Klosters with Harley remaining as Chairman.

Michael's contribution was to expand the company from its two locations in Newcastle, to a total of five. Michael continued in the automotive area in Newcastle with part ownership in Pep's Auto Spares, which now has numerous outlets, a Ford dealership in Maitland, and he was also managing director of Maranello Concessionaires - the Australian and New Zealand importers of Ferrari.

Harley Kloster is remembered as a fabulous Newcastle character, and his name is one that seems to inspire a knowing smile with everyone who knew him. He died in 1986, and his wife Joffre in 1995. Having sold the business in 1975, Harley was able to spend some good years in retirement after all his hard work. He would surely be chuffed to think that the Kloster company is now in the hands of people who continue to feel that they are a part of its founding family.

As well as being a significant contributor to business in Newcastle - like his father and grandfather before him in Sydney - it seems

that Harley lived his life large. This was, after all, the man who was on his boat one Sunday afternoon in September 1951 when an RAAF fighter aircraft suffered an engine failure and ended up in Lake Macquarie between Pulbah Island and Wangi Wangi.

"The aircraft remained afloat for several minutes and then sank in about 30 feet of water. Mr Harley Kloster and Mr John Hall, Newcastle businessmen, were in Mr Kloster's cruiser launch, Joffre, anchored a mile away when they saw the plane crash. They picked up the anchor quickly and reached Flight-Sergeant Lionel Henry Cowper in a few minutes. They lifted him on board, and took him to Wangi, where the RAAF crashboat met them. The crashboat took him to the Rathmines air base. He returned to Williamtown by car. Mr Hall went on to report, 'He was very cool. He told us, 'If I had seen you coming, I wouldn't have bothered to blow the dinghy up!'" (SMH, 17 September, 1951)

It's a long way from the Kloster family's humble origins in 19th century Konigsberg (in Prussia) to 21st century Newcastle. But their journey is in many ways a classic Australian story of emigration - hard work, maybe a spot of good luck and always impeccable timing. ◊