

Wilkie's Pie Cart

By Graham Gittins: Project Manager for the restoration of Wilkie's Pie Cart.

Q. What was Canberra's first fast food outlet?

A. Probably Wilkie's Pie Cart.

As the song goes 'meat pies, kangaroos and Holden cars' could well have been Canberra's theme during the formative years of the city in the 1930s to the 1970s.

In the early part of that period, Canberra was little more a dusty paddock with few buildings, apart from Parliament House, Albert Hall, the two civic buildings and some government offices, hostels and a few houses.

Cafes were few and far between and access by workers to food outlets was limited by the distance from their offices. Some were lucky in that they could walk home for lunch, but others availed themselves of the services provided by the mobile pie carts which called at the offices and other places.



Pie Cart at *Marques in the Park* 2014

There were two early pie carts operating in the area. One by a fellow known as the "Posh Pie Man" as he wore a bow tie and drove a Thames Trader van. The other, and more widely known, was "Wilkie's Pie Cart" owned by Tom Wilkinson.

Tom was the proprietor of the Top Hat Cafe on the corner of Furneaux and Franklin Streets in Manuka and his pies were very popular. One customer was heard to say "Wilkie's pies are just the best, and his cream buns are to die for."

Wilkie's Pie Cart became a familiar sight around Canberra between 1939 and the early 1970s. Such was the reputation of the quality of his pies that it was not unusual to see a number of parliamentarians standing in line to buy a pie and a sausage roll for morning tea or lunch when the pie cart came to Parliament House.

According to folklore a switch board operator used to call around Parliament House advising all of the arrival times!

Tom was always seen in his usually attire of a grey dustcoat with leather money bag strapped to his waist, beside his 1939 Chevrolet van, while his two lady assistants would dispense the pies, sausage rolls, ice cream, cream buns, cigarettes and musk sticks to his customers.

On the weekends, Tom and his pie cart would be seen at the various sporting ovals before starting time. Some stories say that the times for the football games were staggered so that the pie cart could get around to all of them at half-time. The Ainslie Football Club had their well-known 'pie nights' and you can guess who supplied the pies.

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Some of the Canberra Tech students used to give Tom a hard time, so one his pastry cooks Leicester Donoghoe used to accompany him.



Leicester & the Pie Cart

Eventually Leicester bought the pie cart side of Tom's business and continued to serve the government offices in Barton, the tech college, the parliamentary triangle and the developing Fyshwick areas.

In the 1970s Leicester decided to update to a Toyota Light Ace and the original '39 Chev pie cart was relegated to a back-up role. Eventually, Leicester and his brother Phillip took the old van down to a property in Burra, south of Queanbeyan, where some years later it was allegedly run into a gully and left to deteriorate.

In 1990, by pure chance, the old Wilkie's Pie Cart was discovered on a property near Murrumbateman.



How it got there from Burra remains a mystery, but a few visionaries saw the opportunity to restore a part of Canberra's history.

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Many months of talks, negotiations and analysing the best way to tackle the restoration followed. Eventually a partnership of the Council of ACT Motor Clubs and Copland College was formed to undertake the project.

Funding came from the Council, the ACT Government (in the form of Heritage Grants) and many other clubs, businesses and private individuals.

A team of car club members and students of Copland College worked for more than three years on the project. Each Thursday afternoon the team would get to work determining what had to be done and getting on with it.

One of the ideas behind the involvement of the college students was to instil in them an interest in heritage vehicles.

They stripped what was left of the old van back to individual components. A few doubtful moments rose along the way, but with a lot of ingenuity and searching, missing parts (such as the gear box, differential, brakes, electrics, glass, door handles etc) were donated or located.

The engine was past any useful life so a replacement of the same type and size was donated by a car club member.

A new braking system was fabricated along with many other parts, body panels were re-worked and a replica wooden floor rear section was constructed from donated timber.

The biggest hurdle was the lack of drawings, so the entire van had to be restored from photos and memories of those who could remember the old van Tom Wilkinson standing beside it. It's a remarkable tribute to those involved.

The van you see today is just the same as when Tom Wilkinson and later Leicester Donoghoe used to ply their pie and other foods around the local area.

The entire project is an example of how, with a bit of enthusiasm our history can be restored for all to see.



The Canberra Pie Cart at "Shannons Wheels 2019" car show in Queanbeyan