

Stories from the Shed: *Behind the Bar*

Paul O'Neill (2020)

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- **Story-teller's** cultural background: **Australian**
- **Categories:** Rural/Urban, Humorous, Life-style
- This story of Paul's pub-work in rural and urban south-east Queensland has both humorous anecdotes and a description of what went on behind the scenes that adds to our recollections of what life was like in days gone by.

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Contents

Behind the bar

Paul O'Neill

My uncle and aunt, Noel and Gabrielle Hayes, were the licensees of the Railway Hotel in the small Darling Downs town of Allora through most of the 1960s. Both were well suited to the hotel trade. Noel was an ex-policeman and CIB detective and Gabrielle was a nurse, or as she always insisted, “a triple certificated Sister!” I spent many a school holiday in the Allora pub, roaming that classic Queensland country town with my cousin, Chris. We were free to wander around behind the bar when it wasn't busy, begging chips and soft drinks from the barmaids or Aunty Gabrielle who was a bit of a soft touch.

By the time I was in upper high school, Noel and Gabrielle had moved from Allora to Brisbane and taken up the licence of the *Coronation Hotel* in South Brisbane. The “Coro” as it was known to the locals, was a great business at the time, as it was situated across the road from the large Pauls milk factory and close to a number of other large businesses along Montague Road. At that time, family members were able to work in the Hotel from age 16, even though the legal drinking age was 21. From virtually the day I got my driver's licence, at age 17, I started work at the Coro.

Noel taught me to “pull a beer” and Gabrielle showed me how to operate the manual till. After just one shift, I was thrown into the deep end on a Saturday under the supervision of a young barmaid who was only just tall enough to see over the counter. She was, however, very experienced and amazed me with her ability to hold six pots of beer at once in her tiny hands without spilling a drop. I eventually mastered this skill, but I can't say that I kept dry hands.

The hotel was fairly similar to the *Railway Hotel* in Allora. Upstairs there were individual rooms, theoretically, but never in reality, available to the public. As I always understood it, this was the difference between a Hotel and a Tavern, the Tavern not being required to have accommodation available. Downstairs was the large kitchen that served as the family's living area during the day, a cold room, store rooms, and the bars, lounge and bottle shop. I really enjoyed the bar work and eventually became proficient enough to manage the public bar, private bar, ladies lounge and bottle shop by myself during quiet periods in the afternoon when Gabriel and Noel had a rest.

In the early 1970s, it was fairly normal for workers to head to the local pub for lunch and a couple of beers. The Pauls workers had lunch in shifts between 12 noon and 2:00pm. This

was a time for all hands-on-deck, with up to four of us in the bars and extra staff in the kitchen. My mental arithmetic skills were seriously taxed in the early days in bar, but I was eventually able to calculate the cost of a “shout” quickly and correctly. Standard practice in those days was to tell the customers the cost of the round when it was placed on the bar and before payment was taken. The manual till had no ability to calculate change either and the clientele of the Coro watched their change with eagle eyes, so there was no room for error there either. The options available to drinkers were far more restricted than in modern day hotels. The Coro was a *Carlton* hotel, so a beer was just a beer. No light beer, no fancy beers, just beer. I often remind fellow drinkers today that when I first started working, a pot of beer was 16 cents. There were a few rum and scotch drinkers but 90%+ of sales over the bar were beers.

Some of the regulars arrived at 10am and pulled up stumps at 10pm. One of these was a very quiet old gent called Stan. Stan threw me on my first day when he ordered a scotch Tasmania WITH a beer. I was saved by Noel who told me what Stan wanted was a small beer glass (5oz) fill with scotch to the top of the engraved map of Tasmania that was part of the Australia map, engraved on the glass. This was topped up with beer.

Stan was at the centre of a bit of a scare for me some months into my time in the bar. Gabrielle was quite a character, and though she could be a softie with her kids and their cousins, she always had an eye on the dollars. I had gone into the bottle shop before opening one morning looking for the spirits bottles that belonged in the front bars. There, with funnel in hand and the half-full spirits dispensers lined up on the bench was my dear aunt topping up the brand name scotch and rum with much cheaper spirits.

Next day, Stan arrived and as usual I had his scotch Tasmania poured and on the bar in front of his stool. I got my normal grunt and head nod as he settled in for his 12 hour “shift.” A puzzled look spread over his face as he waved me over, telling me that there was something wrong with his scotch Tasmania. Sprung! Luckily, Gabrielle was doing some paperwork in the bottle shop so I happily handed the problem to her. In front of Stan she poured herself a scotch, screwed up her face as she drank it and declared that the scotch had “gone off.”

Most regular customers were well behaved and friendly, but from time to time, what Noel called “drop-ins” could become a little rowdy. Both Noel and Gabriel were very experienced and capable of managing most incidents, but in the rare times when things got well out of hand, it was time to call for “The Lance.”

Lance was the biggest Doberman Pinscher I had ever seen. I was just over 6 foot and Lance came up to my hip at his shoulder. Lance was the family dog, not a guard or attack-trained dog, but Noel had trained him well. One minute he could be rolling around on the ground with kids climbing all over him, the next he could be a snarling monster, controlled simply by the tone of voice of his masters or even regular bar staff.

I clearly recall a small group of “drop-ins” demanding service after closing time when I was in the bar alone one night. Having failed to convince them that they should leave, I grabbed a lead and headed for the door to the hallway where Lance roamed after the family retired upstairs. He heard me coming and started his performance even before I got to the door. End of issue.

Lance's standard reward after closing, was to slurp out the drip trays where spilled beer accumulated during the day. He topped this off with a couple of packets of chips which he tore open himself.

From time to time, during school holidays, I moved into the pub and did the groundsman's job while he was on holidays. The job entailed a lot more than just sweeping up. I had to “spear” the kegs and load up the fridges for the day. When the beer truck arrived with a supply of kegs, I had to roll them off the truck and down the corridor to the cold room.

I was lucky that the first delivery driver I worked with was a kind soul. He showed me the truckies trick for unloading the heavy kegs. A tyre was placed beside the truck and the keg rolled off to bounce on the tyre, if caught just as it reached the top of its bounce, the keg could be easily landed on an edge and then rolled along without too much trouble. The backyard of the pub was covered with decomposed granite that had to be raked every day. The tools and cleaning chemicals were stored in a concrete air raid shelter that had been built during World War Two.

The *Coronation* was a good business when Noel and Gabriel took it over, but after a few years, business started to drop off as *Pauls* closed down part of their plant and management attitudes in many of the local businesses hardened against lunchtime drinking. The brewery naturally noticed the steady decline in their returns and sent a group of managers out to talk with Noel one Saturday afternoon. As you might expect these discussions were held over a 'few' beers in the public bar.

As the afternoon wore on, the company heavies requested some lunch. With no kitchen staff working on Saturdays, it fell to Gabrielle to put together a large plate of sandwiches for

the rather unwelcome visitors. These disappeared in a few minutes and more of the same was requested. By this point the kitchen reserves of ham and chicken were almost exhausted. No problem for my creative aunt. When I dropped back the second empty tray. Gabrielle split her sides laughing. *“They ate them all?”* she asked, through her tears and snorts of hilarity. *“Yes,”* I reported, *“and just as quickly as the first lot.”* As she continued to hyperventilate, she managed to blurt out, *“ Half of them were spread with Lance's dog food!”*

It was a fit revenge. *Carlton* replaced them in the *Coro* a few months later with a well-known football identity, assuming that he could turn the business around. He didn't and the pub closed up a year or so later.

I told both these stories and many more when I delivered the obituary at both their funerals decades later. Both Noel and Gabrielle had an enormous impact on my early life and working with them exposed me to a side of life that our home life sheltered us from. I learnt scores of bawdy jokes and stories, how to deal with difficult and happy drunks and the discipline required to simply show up and do a fair day's work. Experiences gathered from **behind the bar** helped me throughout my adult life.

1694 words – Paul O'Neill (Member number 660)