

## A Street of Seedsmen: Plant Retailers in Victoria Avenue, Whanganui

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**ABSTRACT:** In the 1940s, seedsmen, florists and other plant retailers were generally located on main streets of towns and cities. This paper looks at Whanganui as a case study of the relationships between plant retailers and the landscape, people and capital. The challenges of researching businesses and quantitative history are woven throughout.

In the 1960s, buying and selling plants for the home garden in New Zealand changed dramatically. In the 1940s (and for several decades before that) plants were sold by small, inner-city shops and mail order nurseries. Sales were very seasonal, service was very hands-on, and people often used public transport or a delivery service to get plants home. Then in the late 1950s and into the 1960s, garden centres opened in the suburbs and on the edges of towns, with parking, year-round sales, and self-service.<sup>1</sup>

The above is an oversimplification of the complicated shift in plant retailing, but that there was a large change will suffice for this paper. This paper focuses on the time before the shift, because to assess how much something changed, we must know what came first. Presently, we don't know much about garden retailing in the 1940s because our garden histories don't discuss business and our business histories don't discuss gardening or

small businesses.

To begin the study, I wanted to build a database of all the businesses that grew and sold plants for the home market. I started with street and trade directories, namely *Wise's* and the *Horticultural Trade Association*. Once I had names and addresses, I tried to finesse the start and end dates of each business with Papers Past, probates, and other archival sources for a few test locations (Auckland, Whanganui and Christchurch). I also tried to categorise businesses as I went, i.e. garden shop, garden centre, different types of nurseries.

When I got to about 900 businesses that operated in New Zealand between 1945 and 1980, I started to get quite excited. I thought this database would be able to quantify the rise of garden centres, the demise of seedsmen, show which regions had the most garden retailers, and provide some really juicy evidence.

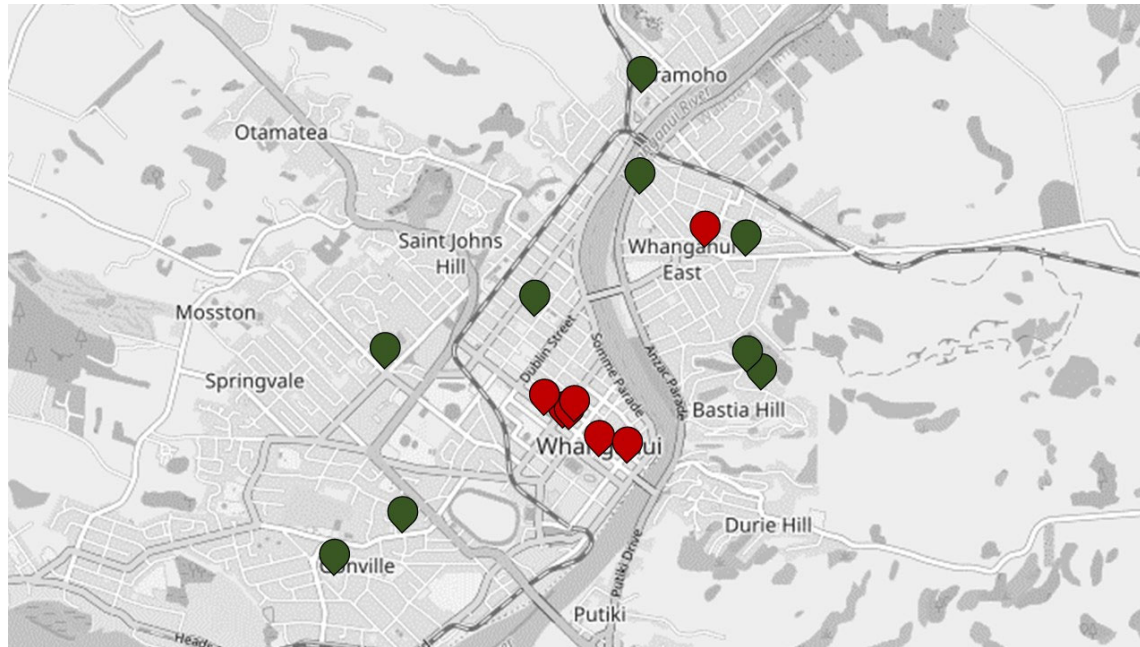
But there are two problems. First, it's not possible to get truly accurate start and end dates. Start and end dates of businesses are often a bit ephemeral and then trying to find a reliable source on top of that – it's often just not possible. *Wise's Street Directory* was particularly frustrating, often including people when they were no longer in business or had died.

The second problem is the scale of work this requires. At the time of writing, I have Whanganui in the 1940s to the point where I am fairly confident I know who was operating and when and where. But this took a significant amount of time, and I cannot research the entire country to that level of detail. I'm not even sure I'll ever get Auckland or Christchurch to that level of detail. And that's just the 1940s. Plant retailing took off in the 1950s and 1960s.

<sup>1</sup> For more detail on this change, refer to Jordan "The

introduction of garden centres to the Hutt Valley" pp

111–121.



were four retailers, which were plant shops or florists/plant shops:

- \* Marguerite Floral Studio, 211 Victoria Avenue, c1938-c1943
- \* Nellie Ngan Kee, 181 Victoria Ave, c1943-c1948
- \* Parnell and Agnew /Parnell, Cox and Agnew / The Plant Shop, 172a Victoria Ave, 1939-1982
- \* Enid Robinson /Robinson and Couchman /Covent Garden Florist Ltd, 167 Victoria Ave, 1938-1950

From advertisements, it appears some florists also sold seeds, seedlings and larger plants. If evidence is found of this happening, they are included in this article as a plant retailer.

Towards the river, was Farm Equipment Company on Maria Place and Wanganui Produce Company on the Avenue, which served mainly rural customers.

There was also a florist/plant shop in Whanganui East, Katharine Florist, although I've only found reference to it being open in 1947.<sup>2</sup>

**Figure 1:** Businesses in Whanganui that grew and sold plants for the home market. Green icons are nurseries, red are plant retailers.

I did not create a "database of answers," but my database of questions will still be useful. I've realised that a nationwide approach might not be the best way of writing a gardening business history. Instead, I'm going to investigate several themes with a geographic location as a case study. The theme examined here is the relationships behind the businesses, with the case study of Whanganui in 1940s. Relationships with the landscape, other

people, world events, and capital will all be examined.

### Landscape

Figure 1 shows the businesses that grew and sold plants for the home garden in Whanganui in the 1940s. Nurseries are in green, retailers are in red. All the plant retailers except one are on or adjacent to Victoria Avenue (often just called the Avenue). In "Mid-Avenue" there

<sup>2</sup> Katharine Florist "Smart Girl [advertisement]" p 1;

"[advertisement]" p 1.



**Figure 2:** Passengers board the Castlecliffe tram in Victoria Ave, Whanganui, late 1940s. Source: Archives New Zealand, AAQT6539/A564

The nurseries are primarily on the edge of town or out in the country and will not be

discussed in this paper.

It is unsurprising that plant retailers would locate themselves in Whanganui's main shopping street. Before the 1950s, plant retailers tended to be located on the main streets of towns or cities, near places of work and accessible to public transport. In larger centres, there were seedsmen in suburbs such as Balmoral in Auckland.

I did wonder at the lack of plant retailers in the suburbs, such as Gonville and Aramoho, although, as noted, Whanganui East had a florist which sold plants in the late 1940s. This could be explained by Whanganui's suburbs relatively slow growth in the inter-war period. One town planning history by WD Ross attributed this to the failed development of Whanganui's hinterland and the abandonment of farms in the late 1920s and 1930s. "Suburban shops were closed," Ross wrote, "some newly built commercial premises were never actually occupied."<sup>3</sup>

Additionally, Whanganui was well-served by a reasonably comprehensive tram network. It was the first provincial centre to have trams

<sup>3</sup> Ross "Wanganui: 1870-1965" p 170.

and by the First World War, tramlines ran from Seafront Road in Castlecliffe through Gonville via two routes, through the town centre via Victoria Avenue and out to the Aramoho, with a branch to Whanganui East.<sup>4</sup> Residents of Durie Hill were (and still are) serviced by the Durie Hill Elevator.

It is also possible that these suburbs did have plant shops, but they didn't advertise, as they depended on local customers. The nursery in Gonville may have sold on the property and I am not sure when they started retail trade.

### Relationships with people

Preliminary research has revealed a complicated web of relationships between the businesses of plant retailers in Whanganui – and that preliminary research may not be enough to understand them completely!

The plant shop at 172a Victoria Avenue opened in 1939 as Parnell and Agnew. The Parnells were a large horticultural family who started offering landscaping and plants to Whanganui

customers in the 1870s.<sup>5</sup> The patriarch of the family, Harold Parnell, had opened the shop on Victoria Ave in 1905.<sup>6</sup> Sons James and Henry had run the shop until Harold's death in 1924. According to family accounts, James had a "major nervous breakdown" after his father's death and did not want to sell plants, deciding to focus on growing plants at their Liverpool Street nursery.<sup>7</sup> The family leased the shop for the next 40 years – during the 1940s, it was a fruiterer, rather than a seedsman or plant shop.<sup>8</sup>

But James' son Harold was keen to sell plants. Unable to use the upper Victoria Avenue shop, he opened a "Mid Avenue" shop at 172a Victoria Ave, in partnership with Bill Agnew in July 1939. Bill Agnew had worked at Farm Equipment Co. for five years before the partnership and had previously worked at Frankish Bros, a Whanganui nursery.<sup>9</sup>

The family history says Percy Cox joined Harold and Bill in September,<sup>10</sup> but it may have been a bit later. Bill enlisted in the army in 1941

and the company immediately advertised for a "boy, smart – excellent prospects learning seed and plant trade."<sup>11</sup> A year later, the company advertised that Percy Cox would be joining them to replace Bill.<sup>12</sup> In April 1943, Harold enlisted and his father assisted Percy in running the store.<sup>13</sup>

Also in 1943, two plant retailers opened across the road from Parnell, Agnew and Cox.

In June, Nellie Ngan Kee, Floriste, opened her "Flower and Plant Shop" at 181 Victoria Avenue. She offered "Beautiful Flowers, Sturdy Plants, and Cheerful Service" and was only 23 years old.<sup>14</sup> Nellie's family had opened Ngan Kee and Co, a fruit market, confectionery and green-grocer, on the corner of Victoria Ave and Guyton Street in 1916. She had worked in the shop, so had retail experience, and for a while the family had a florist in an adjoining building, which Nellie may have also worked at.<sup>15</sup>

A month later, Robinson and Couchman

<sup>4</sup> Stewart *The End of the Penny Section* pp 102-106, 247.

<sup>5</sup> Parnell & Parnell *The Parnells* pp 18-19.

<sup>6</sup> Parnell & Parnell *The Parnells* p 20.

<sup>7</sup> Parnell & Parnell *The Parnells* p 37.

<sup>8</sup> Parnell & Parnell *The Parnells* p 37; "Blanche's Ideal

Home Cookery [advertisement]" p 1.

<sup>9</sup> Parnell and Agnew "Modern and Up-to-date Seed and Plant Shop" p 3.

<sup>10</sup> Parnell & Parnell *The Parnells* p 37.

<sup>11</sup> "Boy, smart, wanted [advertisement]" p 1.

<sup>12</sup> "Parnell and Agnew, Wanganui [advertisement]" p 2.

<sup>13</sup> Parnell & Parnell *The Parnells* p 55.

<sup>14</sup> "Miss Nellie Ngan Kee, Floriste [advertisement]" p 1.

<sup>15</sup> Lam et al. *The Fruits of Our Labours* p 391.

opened about four doors down from Nellie's. Enid Robinson was only 25 but had worked in the horticultural trade for nine years. She started at the nursery Frankish Brothers when she was 16 and probably worked there until they closed in 1937. In 1938, aged 20, she opened her own flower and plant shop on Guyton Street and ran that until she went into partnership with Alfred Couchman. Alfred was about four years older than Enid and had also worked at Frankish Bros, (their time overlapped by two years) before he moved to Farm Equipment Company. Alfred would have been at Frankish Bros and Farm Equipment at the same time as Bill Agnew.

To date I haven't been able to find out much about the ownership of Farm Equipment Co and Wanganui Produce Co., but I am continuing to research both companies.

The connections between businesses also stretched outside of Whanganui, with some employees and business owners working for a few years in other businesses to gain experience and knowledge. For example, Harold Parnell worked for two years at GJ

<sup>16</sup> Parnell and Agnew "Modern and Up-to-date Seed and Plant Shop" p 3.

<sup>17</sup> "The Wanganui Branch" p 7.

ANNOUNCING — THE OPENING JULY 19th (MONDAY) OF A  
MODERN AND UP-TO-DATE

## Seed and Plant Shop

Under the Joint Management of

MISS ENID ROBINSON and MR. ALF. COUCHMAN

<p><b>ENID ROBINSON</b></p> <p>Miss Robinson first began her floral and horticultural trade in the year 1934 at Messrs. Frankish Bros. She evinced great keenness and adaptability for the work and in 1938 she showed her initiative by beginning business on her own account. The great circle of friends and business acquaintances she has gathered in the years that have followed speak very highly of the hard and sincere work and personal attention she has rendered in all floral work entrusted to her care.</p>	<p>Finest Quality FLOWER &amp; VEGETABLE SEEDS, SHRUBS, ORNAMENTAL TREES, HEDGE, SHELTER PLANTS AND FRUIT TREES, PERENNIALS &amp; BULBS, FLOWER &amp; VEGETABLE SEEDLINGS, SPRAYS &amp; INSECTICIDES, BIRD SEEDS &amp; SUNDRIES, MANURES, SEED POTATOES and FINEST QUALITY LAWN SEEDS.</p> <p>Floral Tributes Our Specialty.</p>	<p><b>ALF. COUCHMAN</b></p> <p>Mr. Couchman began his career as a seedsman nearly 35 years ago in Frankish Bros. and was trained along with Mr. "Bill" Agnew under the care and guidance of one of the seed trade's ablest men, Mr. W. Stephen. Seven years ago Mr. Couchman joined the staff of the Farm Equipment Coy., where he has had charge of the Seed and Plant Dept. for approximately 5 years. He has "grown up" in the seed trade and any knowledge he has gained is at your service. He will be pleased to meet old and welcome new friends at the "New Seed Shop."</p>
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Robinson and Couchman offer you Genuine Advice, based on a wide experience in Floral and Horticultural practice.

## ROBINSON & COUCHMAN

The Florist and Seed Shop for Value and Friendly Service

167 VICTORIA AVENUE ————— (Next to Dobbs Bros.) ————— PHONE 5407.

**Figure 3:** The opening advertisement of Robinson and Couchman. Source: Wanganui Chronicle, 17 July 1943, p 3.

Mackenzie, a large seed merchant in

<sup>18</sup> Dorothea Gillman, The Sun Depot, was listed at 221 Victoria Ave in *Wise's Street Directories* in the 1930s. Her advertisements in the *Wanganui Chronicle* ceased in 1938.

Auckland.<sup>16</sup>

Additionally, there were trade associations. Membership lists are a bit patchy, but at the moment, I'm aware that Enid, the Parnells, and Farm Equipment Co were members of the New Zealand Horticultural Trades Association and Enid and Percy were on the Wanganui branch committee of the Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture. As an aside regarding sexism, a newspaper article on the meeting of the executive in 1948 noted that Enid and another female member of the executive provided a lovely supper.<sup>17</sup> So not only was she running her own business and acting as a committee member, she also had to feed the branch meeting.

Interestingly, I haven't found any connections between Marguerite Floral Studio and the other businesses (yet). Marguerite Floral Studio was owned by Ms Christian J Alexander, who had taken over the premises (and possibly the business) at 211 Victoria Ave from Dorothea Gillman in 1938.<sup>18</sup> I'm not sure whether the two women knew each other, but it seems likely – they lived relatively close

The Marguerite Floral Studio started advertising at the same address in 1938.

together in Whanganui East. Although Christian might not have been directly connected to other plant retailers, she was certainly well connected to the wider Whanganui community. She was an active member of numerous Whanganui clubs and societies, including president of the YWCA "Business Girls' Lyceum,"<sup>19</sup> and was elected Carnival Queen in 1931 by a massive margin.<sup>20</sup>

The Whanganui plant retailers also worked together informally, although I only have evidence of it happening once. In 1947, eight vegetable plant retailers came together and announced that they would all increase their prices for cabbages, lettuces, cauliflower and broccoli, all staples of the 1940s New Zealand vegetable garden.<sup>21</sup> Five days later, there's an article quoting an unnamed Whanganui nurseryman who complained that because the size of the bundles had also been increased, growers were only getting 16% more, while retailers would get 50% more.<sup>22</sup>

Unfortunately, the only thing that I can say with certainty about this now is that it shows

<sup>19</sup> "Farewell And Presentations to YWCA Secretary" p 7.

<sup>20</sup> Christian got 30,000 votes and the next contestant got 17,786. "Queen Contest" p 2.

<sup>21</sup> The retailers were: Farm Equipment Co, Parnell and

the retailers worked together. Despite a lot of searching, there's only two mentions of this in the Whanganui newspapers. I don't know if this price-fixing among competitors continued, the impact it had, or even how this advert was organised. Between 1940 and 1950 (when the Papers Past coverage of Whanganui ends), there is no other mention of Whanganui plant retailers working together. It's still a bit of a mystery.

### World Events

Into this web of interconnecting relationships came the Second World War. As outlined above, Harold Parnell and Bill Agnew served in the war. Alfred Couchman also enlisted and served overseas. I'm fairly sure he was conscripted – in later documents he says that he had limited time to wrap up his business and family interests. He already had two children and his wife was pregnant with a third. He sold his share in the business while serving in Italy.

While it appears that Bill and Harold come home and slipped right back into the business,

Cox, Enid Robinson, Nellie Ngan Kee, Wanganui Produce Co, Parnell's, Katharine Florists and R Richdale. It should be noted that such practices are illegal now. "[advertisement]" p 1.

Alfred did not re-join Enid. When the Rehabilitation Department asked him about his job after the war, he said that the firm can now no longer support two people, although he doesn't provide details of why. Instead, he said he will be asking for a rehabilitation business loan to go into business with Mr Beale of Springvale Nurseries.

Rehabilitation business loan were offered to servicemen (and women) when they returned from the Second World War. The government offered a lot of assistance to help them move back into civilian life, having learnt a bit of a lesson from the First World War. Almost 11,500 business loans valued at 7.5 million pounds were made to returned servicepeople.<sup>23</sup> There was also other assistance, such as import licences, which Harold Parnell took advantage of in June of 1946, requesting permission to import 800 pounds worth of flower and vegetable seeds, bulbs, sundries and garden implements from England, America, Australia and Holland.<sup>24</sup>

This presents a question I'd really like to

<sup>22</sup> "Dearer Vegetable Plants" p 4.

<sup>23</sup> Gould "Repatriation" p 446.

<sup>24</sup> "Questionnaire Regarding Applications for Import Licenses and for Controlled and Rationed Goods" (19

answer, but will probably never get to research: what was the impact of these loans on female-owned businesses? While women did serve in the armed forces and the rehab forms said "serviceman and woman," women would certainly have been in the minority. And even *The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Military History* says that business loans were issued to "servicemen."<sup>25</sup> What impact did this have on businesses like Enid and Nellie who didn't have access to these loans? Did it balance out the advantage they had by staying in business during the war? Or was it just one more thing that made it harder to be a businesswoman?<sup>26</sup>

As it turns out, Alfred did not apply for a loan and while Harold Parnell did apply for a loan for a new delivery truck, this also didn't eventuate.<sup>27</sup> So I can't test this out even in the small case study of Whanganui.

### Capital

Access to capital is something I really want to be able to discuss in this research. Making it clear who had access to capital and who didn't

is very important to show why some people could go into business and others couldn't. But it is very difficult to find sources of capital. In Whanganui, the only instance I've been able to find so far was from speaking to a nurseryman who received a loan in the 1950s to keep his father's nursery afloat. I can make some guesses:

- \* That the Parnells had access to family money or at least had family members who would act as guarantors on loans.
- \* Enid's father died three years before she went into business – it's possible her mother gave her some money from the estate, but it wasn't a lot.<sup>28</sup>

But as I say, these are just guesses. Even when a company is set up, there's not a lot of detail in the file. Enid created "Covent Garden Florists" in 1949, probably with an eye to selling shares in the business. The documentation for that lists the current assets of the company (including a fridge valued at an eye-watering £600)<sup>29</sup> and the "capital" of the new company, but not where that capital came

from.

### Conclusions?

By the end of the 1940s, two of the plant retailers in Victoria Avenue had closed. Marguerite Floral Studio ceased advertising in 1943 and Nellie Ngan Kee's store closed when she died in 1948 at the tragically young age of 26 years.<sup>30</sup> Enid Robinson was in the process of incorporating her company, which she sold when she married a year later (although she retained shares in the company for many years). Farm Equipment Co, Wanganui Produce Co and the Parnell's mid-avenue shop held on for a few decades.

Despite a reasonable amount of research, this article is finishing with more questions than answers. The ownership and operation of the farm supply companies still requires more investigation, as does sources of capital. I also intend to run my study up until 1980, so there's another three decades of research to see how relationships within and between businesses changed.

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June 1946).

<sup>25</sup> Gould "Repatriation" p 446.

<sup>26</sup> Research would require searching all of the 7,000 servicewomen's records from the Second World War.

<sup>27</sup> Parnell to District Rehabilitation Officer; Application

for Allocation of New Vehicle; Turnbull to Head Office, Rehabilitation Department.

<sup>28</sup> In the paperwork associated with Enid's father's estate is an attestation that his estate and effect are under the value of £500. Robinson, Victor Percy.

<sup>29</sup> Covent Garden Florists Limited.

<sup>30</sup> It's possible a sister (or relative) Jessie Ngan Kee opened a florist elsewhere on Victoria Street.

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