

The passing of a legend

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NO cowboy worth his busted R.M. Williams would ever have been ashamed to be seen in Jack Brown's Richmond Stores.

Just going in for a browse could see you walk out with a box of ammo, a .222, a roll of 10-gauge wire and a Henry Boker pocket knife. And if it was your lucky day you'd get a weather report thrown in from Jack for free.

It's all over now. Jack passed away on January 29.

He'd only sold the store in 2009.

No one ever thought Jack would really sell.

Little kids coming in from the stations would walk across its timber floors, holding their father's hand, looking wide-eyed at the rifles and bullets, the wire strainers, the bolts of cloth, the piles of heavy chain and ropes, the cowboy hats, the moleskin pants and the denim jeans.

The floorboards would creak and the dust would rise and settle with every fall of a boot heel. With all its treasures, Jack's Richmond Stores was a palace of dreams.

He was born in Newcastle in 1923 and enlisted in the RAAF in World War II. He was posted to Talmoi between Richmond and Julia Creek as a fitter-armourer supervising the storage in specially designed cement bunkers of mustard gas and phosphene gas.

These were Australia's own weapons of mass destruction hidden away on a sheep station 60km west of Richmond.

It was dangerous. Leaking cylinders were taken to a storage site and shot from a distance by the soldiers with their .303s so the gas could escape.

It happened so often and there was so much gas in the air that the trees around the site all died.

He worked with 16 other armourers and occasionally one of them would be burned by the gas and would have to go to town for treatment. Their injuries were often met with disbelief from local doctors, unaware of the covert chemical operation on their doorstep.

After the war the mustard gas cases were sprayed with high-octane fuel and set on fire. Locals turned the old phosphene bombs into mailboxes. Some made homestead fences from the shells and, in one case, the bombs were used as stumps for a dance hall.

Jack married Richmond girl Merle Stainkey in 1949 and opened the shop in 1952, just in time for the wool boom when Australia saddled up for its long ride on the sheep's back.

Jack was many things to Richmond. He wasn't just the town's much loved store owner. He was on the council from 1961 to 1997 and was mayor for five years.

During his 36 years on the council, he only ever missed two meetings and one was because he'd been subpoenaed to appear as a court witness.

He was awarded a medal of the Order of Australia in 2000 for service to the community. He was a founding member of Lions and was on the Richmond Hospital Board for 16 years and chairman of the fire brigade for 23 years. He served on numerous committees and sporting bodies.

Former regional director of education Phil Cullen told a story about Jack and the dangers of self-praise that was retold by Mayor John Wharton at the February 3 funeral. Phil had been asked for a second time to the high school speech night and had driven out from Townsville at departmental expense.

“Jack handed the microphone to me and I started to comment on how honoured I felt to be asked for a second time. At this stage Jack grabbed the microphone and said `Before it goes to your head mate, I want to tell you that if we invite one of those roosters from James Cook University we have to pay for their air fares and accommodation. You we can get for nothing.”

Jack lost Merle in 2009. He is survived by his son Mick and daughter Narelle.