

The Hallstrom Refrigerator factory

In late May 1934 a new neighbour had established an important business near the Willoughby Incinerator. Edward John Lees Hallstrom, who had developed a kerosene refrigerator in 1923 in a make-shift laboratory at Dee Why and then further refined the product into upright models under the trade mark *Silent Knight*.

In 1932, Hallstrom purchased *The Hermitage*, the prominent 1875 sandstone homestead at Fig Tree Point in Northbridge, and negotiated purchase of the White Transit bus depot on Willoughby Road, Willoughby, following the closure of that company when the NSW Premier, Jack Lang, shut down the private buses in favour of Government run services. His new refrigerator factory opened there in late May 1934 with *Silent Knight* kerosene, electric and gas models being manufactured there. During World War II the Hallstrom factory manufactured defence equipment, including refrigerators for the US Army. At its peak following the war, the enterprise employed 750 people and was producing 1200 refrigerators per week.

Best known for his services to the Taronga Park Zoo Sir Edward Hallstrom, as he later became, was widely known as a significant Australian industrialist. Interviews with Willoughby residents who knew the man provide a less positive view of his management style.

Felicity Windzor recalls that her grandfather, J B Stephens, who had part ownership of and managed the former quarry at the corner of Willoughby and Artarmon Roads, told her that:

This 'young man' [Hallstrom] came into my office and told me of his dream of putting a refrigerator into every Australian home. His challenge was to find a place in which to build them and he wanted to use the former bus depot on our land. I quite liked the young man and agreed to lease the site to him.

Dr David Pope served as the medical practitioner for the factory employees. Hallstrom personally told him that he had selected this site for the factory because it was near the Flat Rock Creek, which made it convenient for him to discharge effluent and other rubbish into the creek. Accordingly, Hallstrom was continuing the tradition of using local creeks to dump refuse, as had occurred with Willoughby's tanneries along Scotts Creek in North Willoughby.

Naremburn resident Dick Turner played in the Flat Rock Creek area from the late 1930s. He recalls the water was very polluted then, mainly from effluent generated by Fosters' Dairy and the broom factory near St Leonards railway yard. He continued:

I often went down to the Devils Hole below the waterfall with mates. On one occasion we pushed our dogs into the water. My dog was swimming around in circles and in an effort to get him out, I fell into the water. The outcome was that I caught a disease from the water and was con-

fined to bed for the next two to three weeks.

Hallstrom's timing in opening the factory was fortunate. His kerosene, gas and electric models of the *Silent Knight* refrigerator were soon in heavy demand as Australian households emerged from the Depression years. In 1942 the entire refrigerator production (some six to seven units a week) was directed to the war effort so the general public were not able to purchase them. At this time there were around 50 employees at the factory, 12 of whom were in the welding section. This unit produced components for the refrigerators as well as crawler tracks for Bren Gun Carriers and fittings for carrying bombs on aeroplanes. The factory workforce swelled to some 750 people as the war progressed.

Although the demands of war restricted the resources available to local governments for maintenance of infrastructure, as the prospects of a positive outcome from the conflict strengthened, Willoughby Council began to plan for post-war reconstruction. Particular attention was given to defining the use of the Flat Rock Gully area. In June 1944 Council's Works Committee recommended the following engineer's recommendations be adopted:

1. That under S 347 of the Local Government Act the total area, as originally acquired by Council south of Small Street and east of Willoughby Road, less six acres set aside for the garbage 'destructor', be used for the purposes of parks, gardens, playgrounds and sports grounds as may be determined.
2. That the particular area immediately to the east of the garbage destructor be classified as an area for use as children's playground, garden and rest area.



In this photograph taken on 3 June 1934, workers lay sandstone blocks in Small Street, while the former White Transit depot has the new sign: E HALLSTROM, MANUFACTURER KER- OSENS, GAS AND ELECTRIC REFRIGERATORS. Willoughby Museum, David Warner collection, 0256

1. That the expenditure of £630 be authorised for the construction of a pipe culvert across Armstrong Street and Small Street and along the creek to cliff edge at contour 140 as shown on the plan submitted. (The estimated cost of constructing the drain entirely within the tip area being £450 and across Armstrong and Small Streets £180.)
2. That the expenditure of £100 be authorised for the general clean-up of the existing tip, for the formation of terraces as a preliminary to the final development of the area shown on the sketch plan.

This, open tipping of garbage was to be formally adopted, but there were also plans for public recreational facilities within the area. In April 1946, Council's Town Planning, Parks & Gardens Committee approved the erection of a pipe and chain wire fence along the eastern and southern boundaries of the area designated for sporting activities and proposed that "the industrialists of the neighbourhood be asked to cooperate with Council, financially and otherwise, in the development of the area.

WDHS foundation member Brian Day, worked as an apprentice in the Hallstrom factory during 1942 recalls:

There were only 40 to 50 people working at the factory then and I was allocated to the oxy-welding section. Our tasks were to cut out the metal for track parts for Bren-gun carriers and bomb-bays for aircraft. We also cut out the metal for refrigerators, but they were only making six or seven a week.

Mr Hallstrom was a large intimidating fellow. He was a good man at heart, but very brut and abrasive. You could never work fast enough for him. He came into the factory one morning and enquired what were we doing? He claimed we were not working fast enough, so he threw off his coat and threatened to punch the foreman. Fortunately it did not come to this. Later the foreman said: "It's a good job he didn't punch me. I would have sued him for every penny he had!"

In June 1946, Willoughby Council sent a letter to Mr E J Hallstrom of 462-464 Willoughby Road in appreciation of his offer to "contribute an amount up to three thousand pounds (£3000) towards the cost of the work" for improving the land in Willoughby Road/Small Street for public recreation and enjoyment.

The significant drainage works required to develop the land for active public recreational purposes and the development of the playing fields that were to become known as Hallstrom Park were carried out in the late 1940s. Large box tunnels were laid under the playing fields to carry the water from a small tributary of Flat Rock Creek. Fill was provided by clinker and ash from the incinerator, together with garbage tipped on the site. Judy Baird recalls that the area was

full of cockroaches in the late 1940s due to its use as a garbage tip.

Don Soper moved into a house at 132 Northcote Street, Naremburn, with his family in 1947, which included two brothers and two sisters. Don, aged 12, and his brothers played in Flat Rock Creek, often seeking bird's nests to collect their eggs. Sometimes they stopped off at the rubbish tip and scavenged. Don's prize find was a piece of quartz the size of a fist with a streak of gold in the tip. He took it home and his father ground it down and got around half an ounce of gold out of the rock. Don recalls:

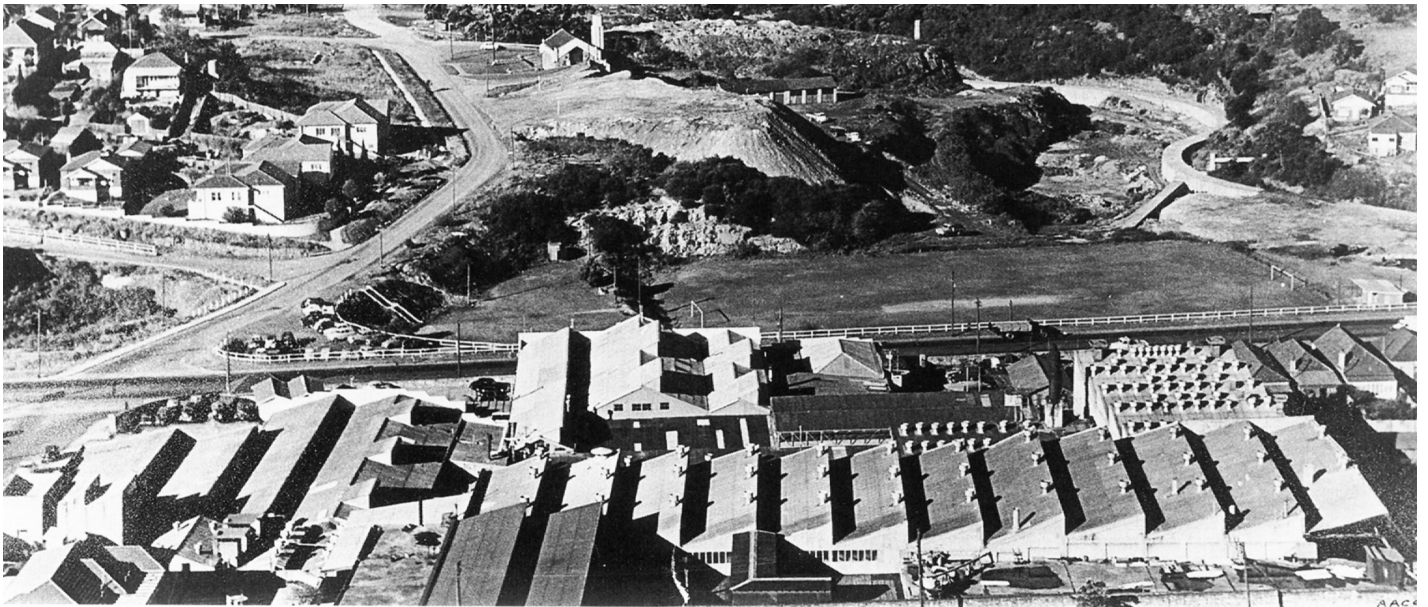
The creek was 'very pretty in those days, with nice clear water and bush'. Later on it became polluted because people threw rubbish—dead chooks and garbage—into the storm drain upstream that ended up in the creek.

A large fire at the refrigerator factory resulted in the loss of some 400 refrigerators, 100 of which were ready for delivery, on 2 March 1948. It was reported that explosions from the fire could be heard up to a mile away and losses were estimated to be between £7000 and £14,000 (\$367,000 to \$734,000 in 2010 terms). Damaged refrigerators were dumped along the creek.

The completed playing fields were laid out on two terraces: the principal field on the southern side of the area was a standard football field size; while the smaller one to the north was higher. There was an access road to the playing fields that ran parallel from Willoughby Road from near the bridge over Flat Rock Creek. A massive concrete retaining wall was constructed parallel to Willoughby Road to support the access road, which provided a great spot for the local children to play games such as kick ball and brandings. Don Soper played for the Naremburn Soccer Club and recalls playing at the Hallstrom Playing Fields when he was 16 years old. It was, he recalls: "The hottest playing field in Christendom!"



The site of the Hallstrom Playing Fields following clearing of the bush on 5 August 1938. Willoughby Road is on the left with Tulloh Street in the background. Willoughby Museum, David Warner collection, 0777



A view of the Hallstrom refrigerator factory in the 1960s from the TCN Channel 9 television tower. The original White Transit bus depot building is at the centre on Willoughby Road with the Hallstrom Playing Fields across the road. Flat Rock Creek is being diverted into a concrete tunnel that would enable expansion of the open-air Council Tip, which is being extended from the Griffin-designed Willoughby Incinerator on Small Street. Image, Picture Willoughby

In the post-World War II era locally-made Silent Knight refrigerators were competitively priced compared with imported models. Buoyant sales of his refrigerators made Edward Hallstrom a millionaire and he turned his attention to philanthropic pursuits. In these circumstances, the factory failed to adapt to increasing competition from more advanced refrigerators made at the Email factory at Orange or Elizabeth in South Australia and the Willoughby enterprise closed in the 1960s.

Much of his fortune was directed to Taronga Park Zoo at Bradleys Head on Sydney Harbour, for which he became a trustee in 1941 and president in 1951, a position he held until 1959, when his son filled the position. Hallstrom personally funded the purchase of many exotic and large species of animals from overseas and he established a farm at Mona Vale to grow food for the zoo animals. A more positive view of Hallstrom as an employer was provided to the Willoughby Museum by a man who worked for a special carpenter's team which built and maintained various buildings and structures at the zoo. In his view, Hallstrom was an excellent boss who treated the carpenters well, but he also remembered the group being regularly called out to undertake work on projects at his private farm. As honorary director of the zoo from 1959 to 1967, Hallstrom retained effective control of its policies and finances.

Hallstrom was knighted in 1952 for his services to the zoo and other philanthropic activities. By the 1960s, however, there were increasing clashes be-

tween Hallstrom and scientists working at the zoo over the management practices he had initiated there. In two public inquiries into Taronga Zoo initiated by the Minister for Lands in 1966, Hallstrom was criticised for not appointing any trained zoologists or veterinarians at the zoo, together with the excessive use of cement in the animal enclosures.

The inquiries, together with constant surveillance from 1966 for illegal trading in fauna, shook Hallstrom badly. The surveillance resulted in 35 people being convicted in illegal trading of fauna and it was alleged that Hallstrom had used his influence to have his involvement concealed. Whatever the reality, Sir Edward donated his personal collection of animals to Taronga Park Zoo in 1968.

Sir Edward's wife Margaret Elliott Hallstrom (née Jaffery) a talented artist in her own right, died in 1966. In June 1969, he married an old friend and widow, Dr Mary Mabel McGuire at St Phillips Church, Sydney. He died at his Northbridge home on 27 February 1970.

References

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