

Leather Tanning in Concord New South Wales

Farleigh Nettheim & Co . 1880-1967

as compiled by Colin S Dodds, last General Manager of the Company

In 1864 two Jewish migrants, Edwin Michaelis and Isaac Hallenstein, settled in Melbourne and commenced business in 441-445 Lonsdale Street, Melbourne, as merchants importing into the new colony, cotton drill, threads and leather, mainly for footwear production.

It was not long before they bought land on the banks of the Maribyrnong River in Footscray and built a tannery producing sole leather to meet the strong demand for solid boots and shoes by the increasing number of footwear manufacturers

The tannery grew quickly and the two partners felt it was time to start business in Sydney. So they sent two of their reliable employees, John Farleigh, son of an English migrant, and Cosmann Nettheim, nephew of Isaac Hallenstein, to start as importing merchants in Sydney, their office being in 80 Clarence Street, Sydney. The company, a partnership at the time, was called Farleigh Nettheim & Co., importing similar products as their counterpart. These two energetic young men could foresee the expanding market in Sydney for both leather and grindery (hardware, nails, threads, cotton drill, etc.) used in shoe making.

It was not long before John Farleigh, who had the technical knowledge and experience in tanning leather, with the financial acumen of Cosmann Nettheim, and some financial assistance from the Michaelis Hallenstein families, sought a suitable site for a tannery. In 1880 they found a rather dilapidated few sheds and some tanning pits in Stanley Street, Concord - or Longbottom, as it was called in those days. They bought the property and adjacent land, amounting to 7¼ acres adjoining the mangrove swamps of Canada Bay, at the bottom of Stanley Street.

In those days Concord was considered a distant suburb of Sydney, but was sufficiently close to the bullock trail of Parramatta Road for transport to and from Port Sydney wharves for shipping.

The growth of the business, after demolishing the old sheds on the site, necessitated the building of a modern tannery in its day. The pits were made from local hardwood, twelve inches by 2 inches, and were puddled in with pure white pipe clay, abundant underneath the mangrove swamps at the time. Twelve inches of clay separated the pits and the four inch by four inch square timber underground pipes carried the tanning liquor into wells, which was then pumped from pit to pit. It is interesting to note that from the early 1880's until the tannery closed in 1967 the pits and underground drainage system were still in perfect condition.

It was the custom in the early days of Sydney for many industries to be located on waterfront sites for two reasons - firstly, both goods in and out of the factories were by barge and, secondly, all the factories discharged their industrial waste into the waterway. The tannery was no different from the other industrial concerns and it was not until the sewerage pumphouse was built in Cintra Park that the tannery discharged its effluent into Sydney's sewerage system.

It is interesting to note that even up to the 1960's the writer found that, after heavy rainfall, householders discharged stormwater into the sewerage system. Cintra Park Pumphouse could not cope, so most of the householders', as well as the tannery effluent was discharged into the Parramatta River.

The tannery's water supply in the earlier years was by means of a dam half way between Burwood Road and the mangroves near Stanley Street.

John Farleigh was the mainspring of the new tannery in the early 1880's but, unfortunately, he died in 1885 and John Lawson, a Tasmanian well versed in the technicalities of making sole leather, afforded the company the reputation to become known worldwide as "King of Mimosa" Brand. John Lawson lived and worked in Concord and died at the age of 90 years. On his death the management of the tannery was under the control of his son, Alfred Lawson, who served in the First World War and did not return.

One of the original founders, John Farleigh died in 1884 and was succeeded by his nephew, John Gibson Farleigh, who later became a member of the Legislative Council of New South Wales. He had joined the company in 1877. He, together with Cosmann Nettheim, ran the company after becoming quite prominent in the financial affairs of the State. John Gibson Farleigh, with his commitments in government, appointed his son, Howard Farleigh, as the Tannery Manager. Cosmann Nettheim remained active in the business until his death in 1907 and Ernest Baruch was sent from Melbourne to assist John Gibson Farleigh in the management of the company. These two gentlemen developed the business at a great rate and encouraged young active members of their staff to managerial positions.

Charles Dodds, who joined the company in 1909 as an office boy, became Sales Manager of the company in the early 1920's, developed extensive export sales of sole leather to China and Hong Kong. In 1981 John Gibson Farleigh died and Ernest Baruch became Managing Director of the company, comprising both the merchandising and tanning aspects of the business. Howard Farleigh continued as tannery Manager.

In 1947 Ernest Baruch died and Charles Dodds was appointed Managing Director of the company. The business prospered during his term, in both the merchandising and wholesaling of a variety of products, some not necessarily associated with the footwear industry. In 1950 Howard Farleigh retired as Manager of the Concord tannery and Ron Ashby was sent from Melbourne to manage the tannery for a short period.

Charles Dodds' son, Colin Dodds, who was a trainee industrial chemist at the then B.A.L.M. Paint Laboratory for four years after leaving school and subsequently spent nine years at the Footscray tannery in Melbourne, where he was Factory Manager, was appointed as Director and Tannery Manager of the Concord tannery. He served in this role, developing in addition to tanning sole leather amounting to 1000 hides per week, to tanning in excess of 1000 kangaroo skins per week for both the garment and toy industries and in 1965, on the retirement of Charles Dodds, was appointed as Director and General Manager of the whole Farleigh Nettheim Company.

In 1967 the major shareholders of the company, including the Michaelis Hallenstein Company, Farleigh Nettheim and companies in Adelaide, Perth, Brisbane and Dunedin, acquired J. Bayley & Sons, the second largest tanning and merchandising group in Australia. Consequently, it was found more practical to move the tanning operation of the Concord tannery to Botany. Colin Dodds then negotiated with the N.S.W. Valuer General, who had the responsibility of purchasing property for the N.S.W. Education Department, and the Concord tannery property was sold in 1967 for the future construction of the Concord High School.

(There is a painting of the tannery at Concord High School. This was painted by Pat Smyth and given to Colin Dodds, who consequently presented it to the school.)