



CITY OF SYDNEY ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Mick Smith

INTERVIEWER: Richard Raxworthy

DATE: 6 February 2001

PLACE: Mick Smith & Sons, 773 George St, Sydney

TRANSCRIPT

- 0.00 **RR:** This is Commercial Oral Histories of Central Sydney talking to Mr Mick Smith of Mick Smith and Sons, is it?
- MS:** Sons, yes.
- RR:** And how do you spell your full name?
- MS:** Well, actually, it's Howard James Smith, Howard James Smith. Mick's a nickname, yes.
- RR:** So, how do you spell Howard?
- MS:** H-O-W-A-R-D, Howard, yes. Like, Howard Smith, the coal people and the shipping people, yes.
- RR:** And Smith is S-M - - -
- MS:** S-M-I-T-H, yes, that's right.
- RR:** Now, how did you get the name "Mick" then?

MS: Well, I – my mother had a – her aunty visited her when I was just a baby in arms and she picked me up and looked and said, “Oh, he’s a little Mickey-do”, and that’s stuck to me all my life, Micky – I’ve always been called Mick, yes.

RE: So, where were you born?

MS: At Newtown.

RR: When?

MS: ***** 1915 – I was born at Newtown.

RR: And you grew up there?

MS: For a while. My father was a hairdresser and I grew up in Newtown and then we eventually - my father shifted to Kensington and I went to school at Daceyville Public School and I stopped at Kensington till the Depression got that bad my father had to close the business down and he lost both his legs with Raynaud’s Disease and became a pensioner, so I had to start out looking for work. So, I worked ‘round the markets, down in Paddy’s Markets, loading vegetables of a morning and then I went to live with an aunty of mine in Orange [NSW rural town].

1.51 So, I stopped in Orange - went up to Orange in about –I was about sixteen or seventeen then and I opened a barber shop in Orange. In the meantime I’d learnt to be a hairdresser, working with my father at Kensington, and then an old chap up there said – we kept all - when my dad closed the business down at Kensington during the Depression, he still kept the barber’s chairs - and a gentleman that my grandmother was housekeeping for - I went to see her too at Orange - and he said that he would finance me into a barber shop. So, he advanced me the money, I got the chairs – barber’s chairs – up from Sydney and I opened up a barber shop in Anson Street in Orange when I was eighteen, seventeen or eighteen. And that’s when I – that’s why I stayed there right through till the start of the war in 1939.

2.49 Then I was in the militia for twelve months before the war started and when the war started I was in the first camp of the war at the Bathurst Racecourse – that was in 1939, that’s right, yes – I think it was the seventh month or something in 1939. So, I was in the army there, in the 54th Battalion, and then I ruptured a spleen carrying a – we were doing machinegun practice and I was carrying the water can and I fell over and ruptured my spleen and they put me in hospital. And I was in hospital there for about six weeks in sick bay and down came the colonel and doctor and he said, “We’re going to discharge you”. So, I says, “What’s up?” He said, “Well, you’re not much good to us and you’re not much good to yourself in the state you are now, so you are

being discharged". So, instead of going overseas with the 54th Battalion I was discharged, so I came to Sydney.

3.52 And I started – an uncle of mine had a hairdressing saloon at Kings Cross and he took sick and he couldn't carry on, so I asked him could I carry on because I was a hairdresser then. So, I carried on up at Hampton Court at Kings Cross in the barber shop. So, then I stopped in Sydney; I never went back to Orange. And from that barber shop then, I bought another hairdressing saloon at number 1A Bayswater Road. Then I had another one 'round the corner in Kings Cross Road and then I – a chap said to me, "This shop is for sale. You're interested in the hairdressing saloons". I says, "Yes". So, he says, "Job is very sick; he wants to sell out". So, I said, "I'll go and see him". He says, "Oh, no, I will drive you down. Knowing you, you're too busy; you won't get 'round to it". So, he drove me down – I pull up out the front, I walked in, I seen Mrs Job. She said, oh, her husband was very sick at home and – but they wanted to sell the business for nine hundred and fifty pounds. I said, "I'll buy it on the spot". So, I drove over then, over the North Shore to his home where he was and I paid him five hundred pounds in cash and then I paid four hundred and fifty pounds – the balance of it – and plus I paid then extra for the stock. So, that's how I got into this shop – that was before the war ended.

RR: This is this building here, is it?

5.14 MS: In this building here, yes, yes.

RR: What is it, 773?

MS: 773 [George St]. This is 773. So, I bought out the barber shop then and continued on. And then I started to sell fishing tackle; it was a fishing tackle shop for a while. We were selling fishing tackle and fishing tackle. And then I got into sporting goods: we were selling tennis rackets and golf sticks and all sorts of things in the place. It was a bit of a muddle but I continued on with it. And then when the – after the war had been ended or just finishing they decided to release ammunition. So, a chap – one of the travellers – came; he said, "We got a good line of bullets". He said, "I'll send you up a hundred pounds worth of bullets. So, I says, "All right". So, he sends me up a hundred pounds worth of bullets. (Interruption re phone call) So, I bought – I said, "Well, send me up a hundred pounds worth". So, he sent me up a hundred pounds worth and a chap's looked in the window and he said, "Are they real bullets?" And I said, "Yes, they're real bullets". "Oh", he said, "How many can I 'ave?" I said, "Many as you like as long as you pay for them".

6.27 So, he bought some and away he went and somebody else come back. The next thing I know that the hundred pounds worth of bullets is gone – just best thing – I said, "I've never sold anything like this

before in my life". So, I rang him up then at Hoffners and I said, "Look, can I get a thousand – can I get a thousand pounds worth of ammunition sent up?" "Oh, no", he says, "you've got your monthly quota, one hundred pounds worth, that's all you're gonna get". So, I thought, "Oh, dear, oh, dear". So, I said, "I'll have to see if I can get a better quota". So, he told me all the different people that was getting ammunition, so I went round to them all and started asking could I get a quota - and then that's how I started to sell firearms. And then the next thing I knew – do you want all this, do you? The next thing I knew is that this chap at Hoffners told me that HP Alderson, who were in Sussex Street, were looking 'round to try and make up an order to bring out BSA rifles, the first lot into Australia after the war.

7.26 So, I went down to see them and I walked in - he said they were trying to make up an order for five thousand pounds. So, I walked into Alderson's down in Sussex Street, I said, "I'm Mick Smith. I want to see about some guns", and the chap says, "Never heard of you". I said, "Oh, well, you will eventually". So, I walked in and I spoke to him. I says, "You're making up an order for five thousand pounds?" He says, "Yes, that's right". I said, "Well, I'll buy the lot". So, I put five thousand pounds on the counter. And he looked at me and he says, "Just a minute". And he went out the back and I could hear him saying to somebody, "Mick Smith's in the shop. He wants to buy five thousand pounds worth of rifles, our first shipment". So, he said – the next thing he came out. He says, "Come out the back", he says. No, before that he says, "You ought to see all the money he's got". He said, "He's put it all on the counter – five thousand pounds – he wants the lot". So, when I go out the back then to see his brother, he says, "Come 'round here – little chap, smaller than me, sitting in the chair and he's got a trumpet in his ear and he's talking to him through the trumpet. I'd never seen one before or since. So, that's how I bought my first shipment into Australia of BSA rifles after the war – so I was on my way as a gun dealer.

RR: What bore were those rifles?

MS: .22 – yes, .22.

RR: And all the ammunition you bought, that was all .22, was it?

MS: All .22, yes. But that was being made locally. Yes, so I started – that's how I started in the gun business. And from out then I grew to be the biggest gun dealer in Australia.

RR: Did you have a wholesale business?

8.54 MS: Oh, yes. I went wholesaling after that: I was retailing and then I went into the wholesaling, yes, distributing for ICI and Winchester. That's what I said, I had twenty one people working on the staff then, distributing. What's that? (break in tape) – the gun business here.

RR: And did you have much competition then?

MS: Well, in those days there was – Mick Simmons were the biggest. They had eleven shops. They were down here – as you know – down the bottom end of George Street here. They pulled the – finished up pulling the old Mick Simmons' buildings down; they had eleven shops. Then there was Anthony Horderns; they were a huge, big country mail order business. And there was Sil there was Cowells and Dunne, HP Aldersons. There was Briscoe, John Sarkes with the people. There was quite a few that were dealing in firearms and I was a newcomer and they wouldn't accept me into the Firearms Association: they had an association going and under no circumstances was Mick Smith to be admitted to the Firearms Association. Definite – I've still got the paper at home. You wouldn't want to know who was the president when we folded it up – Mick Smith.

10.21 So, I climbed to the top everywhere I went I run into brick walls but I got over the top of them - and no graft or corruption; I was just plain business acumen – I got to the top there and so I finished up the president of the Firearms Association when we finally disbanded.

RR: How did you get the Winchester agency?

MS: Well, Winchester. I met a chap from – a director of Winchester. He was here in Australia on holidays. That was about – oh, could have been thirty – could have been nearly forty years ago now and I met him, introduced myself to him and we got very pally. So, we started going out - he stopped about a month in Australia. He was looking 'round, and I give him all the feedback, what was on, and he said, "Well", he said, "it looks like", he says, "Winchester will come to Australia". He was a manager, one of the directors of Winchester. So, when he went back to America, then he wrote to me and then offered me the distribution. And that's how the Winchester got into Australia; was through me meeting one of the directors of Winchester and spending about a month with him, drinking and waltzing around Matilda - and we had a real good time - and that's how - I gave him all the rundown on it and how good it was going to be and that's how Winchester came into Australia and I became the distributor for them.

RR: And you were telling me before we had the tape on that they took it away from you without letting you know before that.

11.54 MS: Well, actually, they got together – Winchester and Remington and the other ones – and they decided ICI – see, ICI from England, Imperial Chemical Company - they were the biggest distributors in Australia before Winchester came in and Winchester cut the daylights out of them. So, they got their heads together and decided that they would go direct and cut me out. And that's all there was to it; it was a

decision in America and in England and they got together and decided to supply the trade direct and not through a distributor like myself.

RR: But that left you in a hole.

MS: It left me in a hole with about a million dollars worth of stock. So, I then said, "Well, I've got to unload it", so I became 'Mick the Discounter'. So, you could buy ammunition cheap – twenty per cent discount off me where you couldn't buy it anywhere else. So, I was selling wholesale to the public and not retailing it and that's where I recouped all my money and built my business up and away I went.

RR: What about the different types of rifles and shotguns and such like – that over the years what's been popular? How has it changed since the .22?

13.01 MS: Well, the first thing made in Australia after the war was the .22 Lithgow single shot rifle. That was manufactured out here, to save importing it - and it sold for three pounds, seven and sixpence – and I used to buy up to fifty to a hundred of them at a time and I'd have people lined up out the front, waiting for them to come in to buy them. And with each – when I sold you a rifle ammunition was still short – I sold you two hundred rounds of .22 bullets so as you could shoot it. You couldn't buy bullets around – you just couldn't walk in the street and buy bullets unless you had quotas and I had pretty good quotas. I'd got very pally with the S Hoffner Company - and they were big English distributors here in Clarence Street - and they gave me a huge quota of ammunition. So, I got all the rifles from Lithgow Rifles: so every month I would give you a hundred rounds of ammunition to keep you shooting, as long as you bought your rifle off me. So, I just – then Lithgow turned out with a bolt action repeating rifle, which was a five shot and that sold for nine pounds, seven and sixpence – so I had the two lots of rifles coming in, fifty and a hundred at a time from Lithgow factory every month and you got your quota of ammunition from Mick Smith to keep you shooting. So, that was if you bought your rifle off me you couldn't go and buy your ammunition anywhere else 'because they never had quotas as big as I had; I had the biggest quotas.

RR: What about shotguns?

14.33 MS: Well, shotguns: they took a while for shotguns to come onto the market. Lithgow didn't make – they made a .410 shotgun; that sold reasonably well. But then when the war had finished and my quotas were starting to come out – when we started to buy guns then from all over the world but it took a long while before we got much guns coming into Australia - I'm just trying to think of what were the first lot that came in. And ammunition was scarce and I put in one tender to the government and I got sixteen thousand, two hundred and forty

eight rifles and that was the little .310 rifle was used for cadet training about 1907. It was never a military firearm but it was a standard firearm. So, I got sixteen thousand, two hundred and forty eight of them; I tendered for them and I got them for four shillings each. So, here I have got all these rifles, no ammunition - because they used to only make a little bit of training rifle ammunition in England - and then the police says, "You can't sell them, they're a military firearm which was - could only be sold to grazier". I said, "No, they are not a military firearm. They were never used in combat, so they were never designed to be a military firearm. They were just the cadet training rifle".

16.04 So, I beat the whole box and dice out here and they couldn't stop me from selling them. So, then I paid the Super Cartridge Company in Melbourne five hundred pounds to tool up and make me a quarter of a million rounds of ammunition so as I could sell the .310 rifle and the ammunition with it. Course, I made a fortune out of those, naturally, with sixteen thousand of them. Then I bought another six thousand later on, so I had twenty two thousand of one particular rifle, then I had a quarter of a million rounds of ammunition being manufactured exclusively for me, so I cornered the market in Australia.

RR: Who was buying them?

MS: Oh, everyone. Some - when I put the first sale on in the morning - I advertised them in The Truth [newspaper]. I took a full page in The Truth, the rifle right across it, two pounds, ten shillings each, beautiful big ad in the full page of The Truth. When I got to work, there was at least two hundred people out the street, lined up 'round the corner. And the police sergeant come down. He says, "Good God, what are you doing Mick? What's goin' on?" I said, "I'm selling some rifles". And fellas'd run in and say, "Give us five, give us ten" and we'd say, "Here you are. Count them", and away they'd go; you didn't have to sign any books or take any number, you just sold them, and away they went. And that's the way - so I paid all the money to get the ammunition made up.

RR: What were they using them for, though?

17.25 MS: Oh, you go out and shoot pigs and 'roos and anything with them. It's just the thought of people that hadn't been able to use a rifle for nearly five years; all of a sudden they've got ammunition and rifles at a giveaway price. That's where I made my - and I bought - I went to the bank manager the first week after I'd started this sale on them and I had a mortgage - I'd borrowed six thousand pounds from the bank to buy this building - so I went down to the bank manager the following week and I said, "Here. Here's the six thousand pounds that I owe you on my mortgage" and he said to me, "What have you done; robbed a bank?" I says, "Pretty near that". And that's how I got this first shop, 773.

RR: And what year was that?

MS: Well, that was in 19 – what was that? – it'd be 1948, I think. I just – I'd have to check on that one a bit. I'm sure it was 19 - - -

RR: So, that's only four years after you started, opened up?

MS: Yes, about 1948, just after the war had finished and yes, 'round about 1948 - but I sold them all and I said I went down to the bank and paid in the six thousand pounds I owed on the mortgage and I bought this first building for six thousand pounds.

RR: What had it been before?

MS: H'mm?

RR: What had it been before?

MS: It was a hair dressing saloon, a barber shop and hairdressing saloon.

RR: And what about upstairs?

18.47 MS: Well, that all went with it. Before that that used to be renting rooms. See, there's ten bathrooms and toilets upstairs and it was a sort of a hotel over the top of the four buildings; was over the top of them. So, that – I can't remember the name of the hotel.

RR: You've never used it as a hotel?

MS: Me, I never used it as a hotel. No, all I wanted to do was get control of it. So, then I bought the lady out upstairs; I paid her two thousand, five hundred pounds to close down – Sherwood Hotel, it used to be called. Yes, Sherwood Hotel Boarding – sort of a - - -

RR: Like a residential boarding house?

MS: Oh, well, actually, most of the time it was people coming and goin' from the country, yes. Like I said, there's ten toilets and bathrooms and showers and everything right throughout the four buildings.

RR: Yes, that must have been – two hundred pounds - well, it wasn't much in those days, was it? And all their rooms had their own bathrooms?

MS: Yes, there was ten bathrooms up there and toilets, yes.

RR: Well, that was rare in those days.

19.59 MS: Yes, yes, yes. And she occupied the four buildings, see. So, then I bought that one, then the one next door, I bought that one. I bought the two next door, those two shops there; that was 775 and 777 and I bought those for – that's when the dollars came in - I bought those for a hundred and thirty thousand dollars. And the shop next door here, that belonged to – that used to belong to – the corner and I bought the small shop, I bought that for six thousand.

RR: That was in 1978?

MS: About 1978. I think it was 'round about that time I bought that. I'm not a hundred per cent sure on these things.

RR: Well, I've got it down as bought in 1978.

MS: Yes. Well, that's I bought that for six thousand pounds from Glendenning and Stacy. They were – not Glendenning and Stacy - Glendenning and Stacy bought it afterwards. Oh, geez, I can't think of it now. I think it was – I'll think of it as I go along. Oh, what the hell was their name? Isn't that terrible? - my memory goes. But I know I bought that one shop off them and then I had an option to buy the whole lot and I wanted – you know, I said, "When are you going to sell me the lot of them?", you know, the shop on the corner and the shop next door, which used to be a dry cleaning business. "Oh", they said, "give us a little bit more time", and in the meantime a chap comes along and says – two chaps that owned it – he was looking for a shop to buy and lo and behold they sold it to him because he's told them that I wouldn't buy the clothing. He said, "Mick won't buy all your clothing" - so, the stock ten thousand pounds – and he says, "I'll buy the lot and buy the building off you".

21.55 So, all of a sudden - I'm playing golf out at Bonnie Doon and a mate – a chap I'm playin' with – he said, "A mate of mine just bought a shop next door to you", he says, "Glendenning and Stacy, for he was down at Circular Quay". I said, "I've been waiting to buy that shop for three years. I bought one part – one shop – off them, the next shop here, I bought that off them and I'm waitin' to get the rest of it". They said, "We only want a little bit more time, Mick", they said, "and you can have the lot". So, I lost it, I lost the corner shop. So, then I bought these two next door for a hundred and thirty thousand; that was a chemist shop and the one next to it was a mercers. It was a chemist shop and a mercers; I bought the two of them for a hundred and thirty thousand dollars.

RR: And you've still got them?

MS: Oh, yes, I've got the four shops, yes.

RR: You mentioned to me before, when I first came around, that you were after selling the whole lot.

MS: I had the whole lot sold. I had fifty thousand dollars deposit paid here eighteen months ago for four million and then I find out they got a heritage order on it. They had a heritage order on it, then they took it off and then they put it back on again and I didn't know.

RR: So, that precluded you selling it?

23.03 MS: Oh, that was the end of it; the chap wouldn't buy it because they couldn't pull it down. You gotta keep the façade. You could only go up four storeys and you gotta keep the façade. So, nobody wants to buy it, buy it with this real old façade out the front and only four storeys above ground.

RR: Now, what about other popular lines that you've had over the years in the business?

MS: Oh, well I'd – we were – we started off, like, with the fishing tackle and tobacconists and then ammunition - and that started to come in and we got that going. And then I had the shop next door; that was scuba diving, underwater diving, selling swimsuits and scuba diving and then I sold sporting goods as well, like tennis racquets, golf sticks, cricket balls, all this sort of thing. But it outgrew that – the guns started to become popular all the time. So, next door then was – we had that for selling scuba gear for quite a few years and then I could see it was growing and I wanted the so I closed that down and I transferred the gun section across there: then I used the whole four shops then for guns because the business grew like mad.

RR: So, what was the favourite product, what were the favourite lines?

24.26 MS: Well, once they – whatever you could get they'd buy. The people had been starved for five years; they hadn't been able to buy any firearms or ammunition, so as much ammunition as you could get for firearms you had a ready market for. They were just scrambling over themselves to buy it if you could bring it in. On one shipment I brought in from England alone was eighty five thousand pounds; that was all antique pieces of firearms.

RR: What sort of antiques?

MS: Oh, antique pistols, muzzle-loading shotguns, all sorts of things; everything pertaining to shooting – was eighty five thousand pounds - that was one hell of a big shipment.

RR: Was that the first time you went into antique things?

MS: No. Yes, we have it – I used to buy a lot by auction from England and they'd send it out to me but then I sent one of my chaps over for

six weeks and he bought an enormous amount of stuff and we started to bring a lot in from England then because we weren't able to import from America - there was an embargo on stuff from America for quite a while.

RR: Who was that, who put it on?

MS: Oh, the government. They wouldn't let us bring the firearms in from America.

RR: Why was that?

MS: Well, they just – somebody come up, just like [former Prime Minister] John Howard, says "You're not gonna have them and that's it". They just wouldn't give quotas to buying firearms from America. Well, once they did, well, the floodgates opened then and then they came in.

RR: And what about scopes, for instance, and night scopes?

25.54 MS: Well, telescopic sights were – it was a long while before they came in, the Raven scope. I financed a chap to make the first Raven scopes in Australia - we used to manufacture them here - and I got a bank overdraft for him and set him in business, making the scopes and then he was selling them out the back door and not telling me. So, the upshot of it was that I withdrew my thing from the bank, went down and for the money to finance the company and they wouldn't give him a loan, so it folded up. So, that was my first venture into manufacturing scopes in Australia – so, that fell over. So, then we imported them - and Kahl scopes from Germany, a chap came in and introduced himself, John Sachs – he was the Commissioner of Peace in Yugoslav, one of the countries over there - and then he came to Australia and he said, "Would you be interested in buying Kahl scopes, the German scope?" And I said, "Oh, yes, give us an order", and he says, "Yes". I says, "Yes, I'll take twenty of them straight away". He says, "Twenty?" I says, "Yes". So, I bought the first lot of German scopes from Kahls in Germany into Australia through John Sachs - he's dead now, yes.

RR: Now, what about other lines such as repeating shotguns?

27.23 MS: Well, they naturally fell into line, like, through Remington and Winchester and the different manufacturers; they come onto the market naturally. Once they allowed them to import from America, well then we could buy all the firearms that you wanted, yes, place. (Two females talking)

RR: What about automatic weapons? When did they start to come in?

MS: Automatic shotguns. Well, they come in - - -

RR: Not only shotguns.

MS: Well, they – the first lot of automatic shotguns came into Australia from – Stewart and Allwoods bought them in – and Laurie Stewart rang me up and says, “Mick, come down here” – he was down in Harbour Street – “Come down here”, he says, “I want to show you a nice gun”. So, he showed me the automatic shotgun. I said, “Oh, good”. So, I bought the first – I think he gave me half a dozen - and I got the first lot of automatic shotguns into Australia after the war; they were Brownings – he was the agent. Then, the next thing he rings me up and he said, “.....”, he said, “I got the under and over shotgun, the Browning under and over”. So, he’s give me three of those and I put them in the front window and people used to say, “Look at the upside-down gun”. Everyone’d say, “Look, at the upside-down gun”, because everyone was so used to seeing English double barrel guns and not seeing the under and over shotgun from Browning, which were the – which was just coming onto the market after the war and into Australia; it’d never been in before the war.

RR: Was that a pump action?

28.57 MS: No, no, automatic. That was an automatic, yes.

RR: And what about the .22s – they used to have a lever action and the pump action?

MS: Oh, there’s lever action – the Browning was a pump action .22 and the Winchester had a pump action .22. There was .06s, there was .62s and then they had an automatic .63s and they all started to come onto the market with a rush then and that’s how firearms business started to grow.

RR: What about handguns?

MS: Well, handguns were always a big, big thing in America. Yes, it was always – always once we – you could get no trouble to get handguns once they lifted the ban on firearms.

RR: But what about here?

MS: Here, yes, once they lifted that. We were all licensed, though, very strongly licensed. The other ones weren’t licensed for a while; you could walk in off the street and just buy your rifle or your shotgun and away you went, yes. And I can’t think exactly when the licensing came in, really - I can’t be sure of that one.

RR: And what about automatic rifles – when did you start to stock them?

MS: Well, they followed suit with all the other rifles; they all came together. Yes, there was no restriction on repeaters or automatics, as long as they were a .22 and they were for sporting, yes.

RR: And of course for people in the bush, for shooting.

30.17 MS: Well, then as I said, all the ammunition was being imported by ICI into Australia and we didn't any ammunition here and then Winchester set up the big factory down at Geelong there – that was 'round about thirty five, forty years ago – thirty five, forty years ago Winchester set up their own factory here. They bought forty acres of land and set a big factory up and manufactured.

RR: And who had the factory at St Marys?

MS: That was the government factory. Yes, that was sponsored by the government.

RR: That's the area they're selling now for housing.

MS: Could be, yes.

RR: Were night scopes ever allowed in Australia?

MS: Well, it's – what do you call it? – they weren't - - -

RR: Infrared.

MS: They weren't knocked back, they were never knocked back. It was just a matter of a lot of those really come, like here a few years ago when the Russians and that, they sort of introduced them. They're pretty pricey but people buy them today – five or six hundred dollars is nothing for a night scope. Yes, they buy them – they're marvellous. You could, you know, you could look at a fella three or four hundred yards away and see him with a knife and fork. They can really – snipers are quite good with them, yes.

RR: What about the banning of automatics?

31.36 MS: The shotguns?

RR: Well, not only that but rifles too.

MS: That's when they – when the government banned all the guns and they had to be handed in, yes.

RR: Did that hit your business badly?

MS: Oh, it did, yes, yes, because we used to sell a lot of automatic shotguns and a lot of automatic rifles too, yes. When they're handing

that in, that was – when was that? – that was only about four years ago, yes. I know them ‘cause they had – they came here and they asked me could they bring up the filming crew for the government for the archives, you know, to keep records of it. So, they had the whole place set up and there was about nine, eight or nine people from the police force were all here while I was handing over the first lot of automatics on the recall [reference to a major gun recall in Australia in 1996]. Yes, that was about four years ago. So, I handed them back - I think it was about a hundred and seventy thousand dollars worth of automatic weapons that I – they compensated me for.

RR: Now, what about the knives? You have to be careful about who you sell them to now.

32.40 MS: Well, as long as they're over the age of sixteen - yes, that's the only embargo they put on them - over the age of sixteen. But they banned a lot of knives, like, what they call "flick knives" - you know, you just touch a button and it would fly out – they're banned. And knuckledusters and different things like that; they're banned – which should never have been allowed. They should never have been on the market, ever. Anyone that had them was only a villain. So, I wasn't against that. But the idea was that young kids couldn't walk in off the street and buy a knife and do damage with unless they were sixteen years or over. That's still operating, yes.

RR: I notice you've got a lot of swords there. When did you start stocking them?

MS: Well, I - when business got – with the buyback and business got that bad - I used to use the four shops for firearms and the fourth shop over there would have eight hundred to a thousand firearms in the storage all the time and that used to be our stockroom. I rent that building now: that used to have eight hundred to a thousand firearms and more was over there and, well, we had no demand for them, so we had to let it come down. So, I turned 'round and cleaned it all up and rented the shop for a thousand dollars a week – so, I got one shop being rented for a thousand dollars a week. And then I still didn't have – I still had plenty of room in the shop next door, where it used to be all – firearms used to all 'round the whole showroom there.

34.03 I don't know how – somewhere along the line people that used to supply me with knives supplied me with swords and I said, "Well, I'll give swords a go". So, I bought about two hundred swords and I turned it into a sword shop, which is a very lucrative business. So, I had the happy knack of jumping from one bed to another bed and still keeping warm.

RR: Who buys swords off you?

MS: Oh, hundreds of people. Yes, never stops. Yes, first customer in this morning bought two for his son, another fella ordered two for his son and, oh, it was five swords were sold before ten o'clock.

RR: Are they sharpened?

MS: Well, they are reasonably sharp, oh, yes, yes, but not over sharp, thank God - otherwise there'd be too many people running 'round, getting stuck with them - got to be careful who's pulling them in and out. But there's some beautiful reproductions and they're a good quality. They're made from 440 steel; that's the best steel in the world you can make them out of. So, they're made - most of them are made in Toledo, Spain, with Toledo steel and stamped "440 stainless" and they're all beautiful models. In history they go back over the years, out of museums and that. But a lot of them are real copies of the old originals.

RR: What about Wilkinson?

35.14 MS: Oh, they're too dear. Yes, Wilkinsons are - Wilkinson sword now has gone up to fifteen, sixteen hundred or more. I got a Wilkinson sword there the other day - they'd gone and chrome plated it. Oh, without being chrome plated I could have got a thousand or fifteen hundred dollars for it but they've gone and chrome plated it all over, a beautiful Wilkinson sword. But they are the best sword made in the British Empire and anywhere in the world, Wilkinson.

RR: But they're still only used for ceremonial purposes?

MS: Oh, that's all, yes, ceremonial, yes, yes.

RR: On one occasion in the air force I was lent one for the ceremonial purposes.

MS: Oh, yes?

RR: Handed it in afterwards.

MS: Yes.

RR: And what about the antique guns, does that carry on? I notice you've got some up on the wall there.

MS: Well, a lot of antiques, the ammunition is not available for them, like bullets and things and you can buy them without a licence - not a hell of a lot but we still sell quite a few. Unfortunately, two weeks ago last Saturday John Kell, who's been - I've known John for fifty five years - John had well over three hundred antique firearms and he works here for me for four years when I bought the Colonial Gunshop across the road, I closed it down, and John and Joe come -

automatically I bought them over here to work for me. John went to bed on Saturday – I seen him on Friday afternoon – I said, “See you next week John”. Good, fit as a fiddle, like you and I, and get home on the Sunday night a fortnight ago and they said he died last night. “Good God”, I said, “he’s only seventy one years of age”. Not a complaint, he was hale and hearty, just like we are. I said, “I’ll see you next week at three o’clock on Friday afternoon”, and he was dead Saturday night. So, he was the biggest collection of black powder rifles and shotguns in Australia. I don’t know what his widow’s going to do with them all.

37.04 **RR: Well, what are you going to do with the shop? Are you just going to keep going or have you got any plans to sell or to - - -**

MS: Well, while the heritage order I can’t sell. Well, I won’t get the money for it. I mean, I was offered four million and I have to refund fifty thousand dollars. If anyone gives me four million, they can have it.

RR: Is that including the shop, the business?

MS: The shop, the business, they could have the lot – I’ll sell out and go, yes. But I can set Michael [son] up somewhere else, yes – but I don’t think that’s ever gonna happen. Do you, Mike?

Mike: I have no idea what you're talking about.

MS: I just said, if anyone comes in and offers us to buy the shop, will we sell? I said, “If they’ve got four million we’ll set you up in another business”. And at the moment I’ve turned it all over to Michael and he’s doing a handsome job with it and we’re all quite happy.

RR: What about employees?

MS: Employees? Well, we’ve got – I’ve only got five of us here now
....

RR: But how many did you have in the first place?

MS: Twenty one.

RR: You’ve got a photograph there of twenty one?

MS: That’s a photograph, yes, of twenty one people were working here - it’s a lot of difference.

RR: What about the turnover?

MS: The turnover? Oh - - -

RR: For twenty one people working here versus now.

MS: Goodwill - - - I mean, the dollar's, you know, gone down and some's gone up. The turnover'd be about, oh, wouldn't even be a tenth – about a tenth of what it used to be.

RR: I see you've got four women employees in that picture.

MS: Oh, yes, they're - - -

RR: Were they all selling guns?

38.33 MS: No, no, all working office work. See, we used to carry big country accounts - we had accounts. See, today you can't do that - you can't – I can't sell you a rifle. If you're an old account you'd ring up and say, "Mick, will you send me up a rifle or a shotgun". O.K, charge it to him – and we had two hundred-odd accounts on the books. Now, it's all – you can't do that. You must – if I sell you – you want to buy a rifle, you've gotta get a permit for purchase, gotta have your licence, then I've gotta send it to a dealer, not to you. I gotta send it to a dealer through a carrier, on a common carrier – you can't post it – and then they've gotta hand it over to him and he's gotta pay a fee to get it handed over. So, some of them charge you twenty five, fifty dollars to do the paperwork, transferring a firearm from Mick Smith to Tom Brown in Boolabooka somewhere. So, it's crazy, there's no business at all.

RR: What about advertising over the years?

MS: Well, I used to have – we still do it once every two months. When we used to be advertising every month - we do a page – it's cost us twelve hundred dollars for a page in a magazine. We do one every two months.

RR: In what?

MS: In the 'Sporting Shooters' magazine.

RR: And that's worth it, is it?

39.54 MS: Oh, yes. It keeps your name before the public, that's for sure. Oh, yes, I get a good response, yes, a good response, yes.

RR: Do you liaise with any of the rifle clubs and such like?

MS: No, I don't, I don't. My son, Michael, is the – he's the captain of the pistol club down at – under the bridge, Harbour Bridge, Sydney Pistol Club. Michael's the captain there, so he looks after the side of the pistols. I've always been very scary of selling pistols. We've only ever used – let one man handle pistols. Nobody else can get a look at a pistol - only with their licence and with Michael. Nobody's

allowed to do them at all. We had one chap here that pinched a pistol and then he pinched – when the police got him he had thirty six thousand dollars worth of rifles and ammunition locked up in his home and he'd pinched the pistol from upstairs. So, there was six police; three at the front door, three at the back door, smashed the doors in, raced in, got him in bed. He had convictions in New Zealand we didn't know anything about. They let him out on a thousand dollar bail and never seen him since.

RR: Did you ever have any break-ins here?

41.04 MS: Well, we've had about three in fifty-odd years. But windows - smashed windows - twenty seven. So, now we never have the firearms on display in the windows ever; they're all under lock and key all the time, yes. And luckily, as I said, in fifty five years I have got an unblemished record with the police. No - not one thing ever gone wrong, thank God.

RR: Well, that might be a good thing to end on.

MS: Yes, yes, I hope so, yes. Oh, no, there's no way in the world. I wouldn't – I don't care who it is – 'because I would never break the law and that's it. I can go to bed conscientiously and say I can sleep for the rest of my life. But, I've ran it my way and the right way.

RR: Thank you, Mr Mick Smith. Now, we were talking earlier on about sporting shooting and I believe that you were a sporting shooter of note at one stage in the proceedings?

42.07 MS: Oh, yes, I did a lot of clay target shooting. I won forty eight championships, six Commonwealths of Australia, four – I was in four international teams, was in three state teams and I shot two hundred straight in the 1940s. Was it '46, was it? – 1950 – I'm tryin' to think when the Olympic squad was – when the Olympic Games were in Melbourne - forty years ago [1956].

RR: I'm not quite sure. '54, I think, or something like that.

MS: No, it was before that. God, isn't it terrible? That was at '56, I think, I don't know. Gee, I'm sorry about that.

RR: So, what did you do at that?

MS: I shot – in the elimination I shot two hundred straight. It was High Gun for New South Wales for the Olympic squad. But seeing that I was a professional shooter; I earnt my living selling firearms, I thought that I could not compete in the Olympic Games. I got a phone message on Friday night to tell me that seeing that we were the host country they'd give me special dispensation and I should be

in Melbourne, shooting for New South Wales, to try and get in the Olympic squad.

43.27 When I got to Melbourne two days later and only had a five bird eye opener, I failed to make the Olympic team. The two Melbourne boys that had been practising for one month on the Olympic traps, which I'd never seen till I got to Melbourne, beat me to the post, and unfortunately I didn't make the Olympic squad. Mick Smith. The buggers, they were there for a bloody month, practicing.

RR: Did you go on from there to do more trap shooting?

MS: Oh, yes, I kept on shooting till - I stopped shooting trap thirty five years ago but till then I was one of the best recognised, one of the best shots in Australia and I was the second - Newton Thomas was the professional shooter for ICI; he was their professional shooter: he was on twenty seven yards and I was on twenty four yards. I was the longest ordinary shooter in Australia as a back marker in clay target shooting for quite a few years. I gave up shooting thirty five years ago. That's it.

RR: Right. Can you think of anything else?

44.36 MS: No, that's about all.

RR: You'll think of something else when I've gone.

MS: No, no, that's about all.

RR: Now, you've got a whole lot of other stories about this area, when you remember it.

MS: There was - Marcus Clarke's, opposite my shop, was the first small Marcus Clarke's. They shifted then to Broadway and opened the big store. There used to be a dancehall where I used to go on a Saturday night: it used to be a shilling to go in and you got a cup of coffee and a biscuit and you could dance till twelve o'clock. At the corner of Quay Street was Saunders, and Orchard's, the jewellers - shops were on each side - and that's where the trams stopped going to Balmain. Opposite my shop, in Marcus Clarke's old building, was the Lottery Office. Then, up where I used to go over to the railway to send my goods away, at the back of the railway post office, was the mortuary where in the olden days you could go and see people that - if you died in Sydney and lived in the country and had to be buried there, you had to be taken on the train, not in a hearse.

45.51 At the back of my store was the Children's Hospital - at the back door of my shop was a drive-in bay for the ambulances. Oh, here we are - (consults notes) opposite Quay Street, on the corner, was a big grain produce store and at the back of Quay Street here was the fish

markets and then Darling Harbour – all goods and trains came into Darling Harbour which is down now where the casino is.

RR: What about your get your dole ticket? Where did you go for that, sign on the dole?

MS: We used to go down to – I think it was number 13 [wharf?] down the harbour. I know I used to go down and get in a queue once a fortnight and sign for your dole tickets and you used to get thirteen shillings a fortnight; that was six and sixpence a week – so you lived on it or you starved to death and that's how it was.

RR: Was it Quay Street, then?

MS: No, it used to be down the bottom here in Darling Harbour and the railway down to the – I can't remember exactly the spot we used to go down and get our pink cards stamped – you 'ad to go once a fortnight. I think it was number 5 Darling Harbour, where we used to go down there to get the dole ticket stamped.

RR: And what about when they used to give you rations instead of money?

47.20 MS: Oh, that's when I was working down the markets of a morning: I used to get paid four shillings for loading up vegetables and all sorts of things and you'd get vegetables chucked in and four shillings for a morning's work. That was bloody hard work, too, just quietly. Bags of onions used to be the real killer; they weigh about a hundredweight and a half - trying to get them aboard a little flat-top horse-driven cart. And then the Lyric picture show, that's pulled down. I used to - that used to be the picture show near me that was – used to go there for the pictures.

RR: What was on when you were a kid?

MS: Oh, I can't remember. Gee whiz, all sorts of things – but it used to be a picture show. And a lot of times you couldn't afford to get in, so at half time you'd wait till somebody'd come out with his girlfriend on his arm, and you see him walking up the street to say, "You going back, mate?" He said, "No". Says, "Can we have your pass?" and we'd nick in and see the second half for nothing. That's how bad things were, really, in the Depression, it was stuffed. And the Hole in the Wall Café used to be a three course meal for one shilling.

48.27 MS: And a mate of mine fought – we used to do a bit of boxing – and Billy fought Jack Carroll. He went fifteen rounds with Jack Carroll - recognised the best middleweight champion in the world – they went fifteen rounds and he got paid seventy five pounds for fifteen rounds for the title of the Commonwealth of Australia Fight. So, we went to the railway and we really played it up, spending three shillings for a

meal each over in the railway - we were millionaires for a month on seventy five quid. Oh dear, oh dear.

RR: You mentioned before we started the tape again that you saw the first talkie?

MS: Oh, yes. Went to the – first one I seen was down the picture show down here and I can't – no, I can't remember the name of the picture show – but I seen a little girl, she got knocked over with a wave and started to cry and that's the first time I heard a voice come on the movies. That was seventy years – over seventy – yes; it'd be seventy years ago.

RR: Did you see the first full length, 'The Jazz Singer'?

MS: Yes, but I can't - - - oh, 'The Jazz Singer', yes, yes. I seen that, yes.

RR: That was the year I was born.

MS: Was it?

RR: 1932.

49.33 MS: Oh, yes. Well, I've been around a long time. I can't think of anything else that – Rawson Place was here – when that place was pulled down over there, all the old shops were pulled down. There used to be the big produce store at the corner. That's where the stables – they used to keep stables over here, opposite where the carpark is now, opposite there for all the horses that used to come in, for drawing the horses up to the wagons at the markets. Yes, it was – ninety per cent of them were horse-drawn carts with vegetables and all that.

RR: Do you remember the ice-rink down there, behind the coal store?

MS: That used to be the Glaciarium – used to be up here and you used to go downstairs for the ice-skating, yes. And there used to be a big timber yard up here – used to be a big timber yard up there when I first came here. And there was a barber shop there and I wanted to buy him out but he wouldn't sell out to me – I can't remember his name – but there was a big timber place up there and the ice-skating rink used to be downstairs. That's a long while ago; yes, fifty years ago.

RR: Do you remember when they were building the tower on the Central Station?

50.56 MS: No, no. No, I think that was up before I got here, yes. No.

RR: All right. Have you anything else that you can remember before we - - -

MS: Friday night in the olden days; Friday nights used to be late shopping, 9.00pm. You'd go to the markets and carry home all your vegetables then at nine o'clock Friday nights - then they changed it over now to Thursday nights. And there was never any Saturday or Sundays' late trading, not for many, many years. No, I can't think of anything else. (consults notes) Hole in the Wall, yes, shilling for a meal, the markets, yes. Friday nights late shopping, Balmain, Lottery Office, mortuary, the children's hospital, the grain, the fish markets, Darling Harbour, the two O'Tooles and Rawson Place, Lyric picture show. No, that's it.

RR: Thank you very much, Mr Mick Smith.

51.48 **MS:** That's as much as most - - -

Interview ends