When I Think Back...

by Neville Williams

Fred Thom and Tasma - 2: From wires and relays to wireless

After gaining experience in radio receiver manufacture at L.P.R. Bean/Stromberg-Carlson, Fred Thom and John Smith left in 1929 to form their own manufacturing company. This flourished for many years, with their brand name 'Tasma' becoming widely known all over Australia. But in the 1950's they began to strike trouble, as did many other local manufacturers.

In 1927, the name L.P.R. Bean & Co disappeared — to be replaced with Stromberg-Carlson Australia, still headed up by Mr L.P.R. Bean. And that's how, as a raw recruit to the industry in the early 1930's, I myself first heard of Mr Bean — from itinerant wirers in local radio factories. In anecdotal terms, that (adjectival) 'so-and-so from Strommys' was the personification of everything they resented in the system!

Reading through the draft of these articles, Fred Thom queried the above observation as an exaggeration. He had worked as Bean's foreman in the early days, he said, and would have known if he had been unduly provocative.

He did concede, however, that Bean had once ruled that process workers visiting the toilets between normal breaks had to 'clock-off' while so occupied! This was in addition to whole production lines being made to clock off, if production was held up by a temporary shortage of components.

Fred Thom says that, from about 1927, the Bean/Stromberg organisation scaled down its involvement in telephone equipment and moved into the importation and manufacture of radio receivers, with the US company having become part owners of the Australian operation.

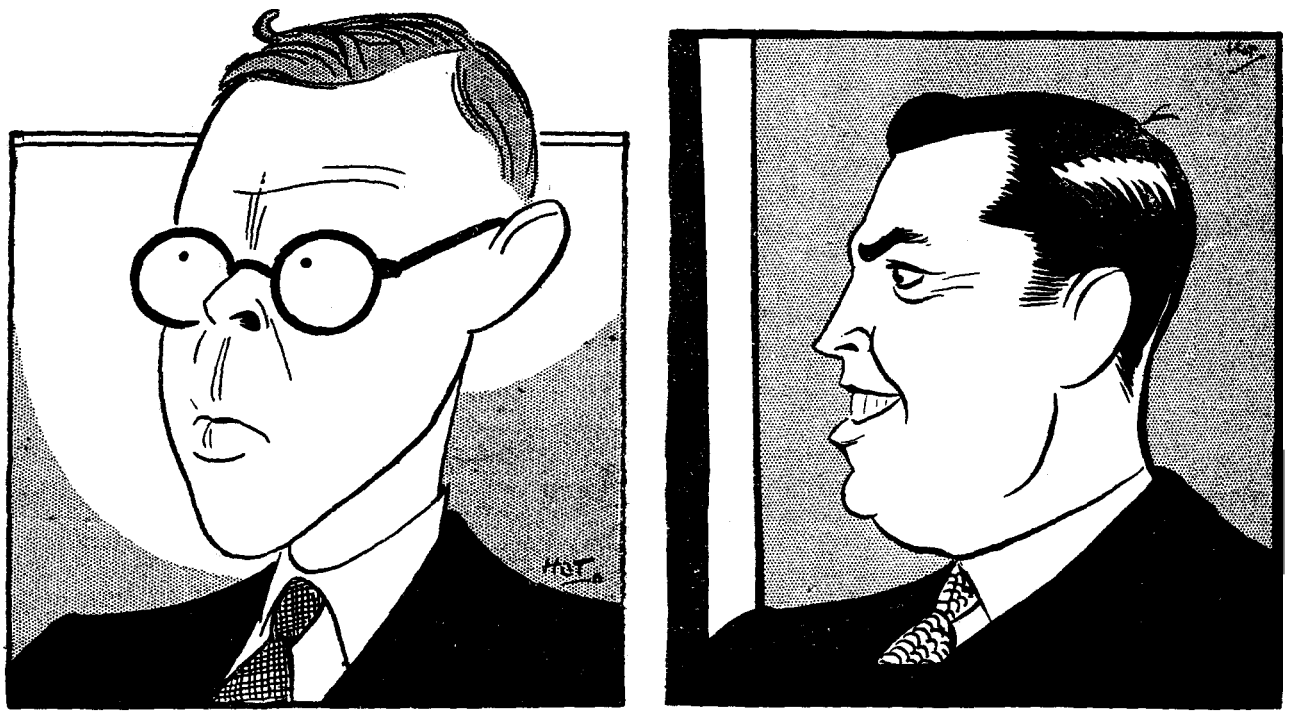

Fig.4: Caricatures of Fred Thom (left) and his partner John Smith, as published in our predecessor, Wireless Weekly, in late 1934. The cartoonist went by the nom-de-plume 'Hotpoint'.

As an employee, and observing what was involved, Fred Thom began to think: "If I can build receivers for Strommys, I can do the same for myself!"

So in 1929, he and two other Stromberg-Carlson employees, John E. Smith and George Woodward, resigned to form a new company to manufacture domestic radio sets. Thom and Smith were to be co-founders, with Woodward, a toolmaker, becoming their first employee.

As electrical/mechanical trainees, none had any formal qualifications in radio. Their total cash reserve amounted to a meagre £500 ($1000) plus a £1000 loan. But nevertheless they did very well. As it turned out, Woodward subsequently went his own way and formed G.W. Engineering — leaving Thom & Smith Pty Ltd to gain wide industry recognition as the manufacturers of 'Tasma' brand equipment.

Fred Thom was accepted in 1932 as a foundation member of the IRE Aust (Institution of Radio Engineers), over the signatures of E.T. Fisk (President) and N.S. Gilmour (Secretary), being made a Fellow in 1940. He was also awarded life membership of the IEEE (USA).

Thom & Smith was well placed to take advantage of the 'golden age of radio' — the 1930's — and Tasma receivers took their place alongside other major brands on the Australian radio scene. By 1938, the firm had around 600 active dealers Australia-wide.

Fig.4 shows the circuit of a table model Tasma autodyne 445kHz superhet, which conforms closely to the trends detailed in the 'Think Back' column for November 1991.

About the size of ft!

The finishing touches were being added to Fred Thom's new factory, sited directly opposite the existing Thom & Smith factory.

Signwriter: "You want 'Thom Electronics Pty Ltd' painted across the front of the building?"

Fred Thom: "Thars right."

Signwriter: "How big do you want the letters?"

Fred Thom: "How big are the ones across the road?"

Signwriter: "I wouldn't know."

A few minutes later, passers-by might have noticed Fred Thom and the signwriter carrying an extension ladder across busy Botany Road. Fred steadied it against the T&S factory wall, while the signwriter ran his rule over the sign.

Signwriter: "The letters are so many inches tall."

Fred Thom: "Then make ours bigger than that!"

In conversation, Fred Thom told me that in its formative period, Tasma used consignment selling to good effect. They would consign modestly priced receivers to selected prospects, e.g. schoolteachers, with an invitation to try them out in their own environment. If unwanted, they could be returned without obligation. If the recipients wished to keep them, payment could be arranged.

"At a time when new receivers were in strong demand", said Fred, "few if any were returned".

Tasma subsequently diversified into the production of car radio receivers — again with encouraging consignment sales, and an even more encouraging bulk order from Ford. The latter sets were branded Tasma-Ford' in a suitable script.

This, in turn, ultimately paved the way for T&S to get involved in two-way mobile communication systems. It was a courageous step, because the production of automotive equipment using valves and vibrator-type power supplies was never an easy way to 'make a quid'!

'Buy Australian'

Fred recalls that, around 1934, the Chief Engineer of the Australian Post Office decided that the letting of con-

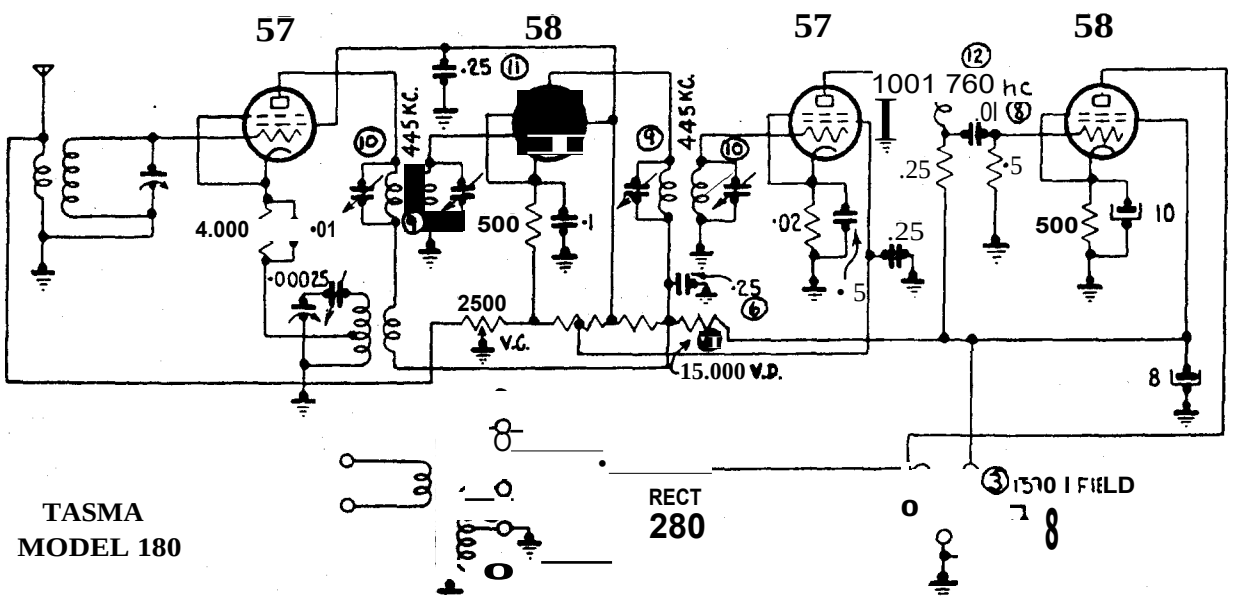

Fig.5: Circuit details of the Tasma model 180 receiver, an early mantel model released In 1933. Reproduced from the HRSA Newsletter for January 1991, the numbered circles relate to points which restorers may need to check

tracts for telecommunication components had become a ritualistic allocation to major suppliers like STC and GEC.

On the assumption that key items like the 3000-type relay could not be mass produced in Australia, these firms had allegedly been submitting non-competitive quotes for the imported product. This, said the Chief Engineer, was a nonsense!

Accordingly, he approached Thom & Smith and said that if they would tool up for local production — at their own risk — using Australian raw materials, he would place an initial order for 10,000 units and do his best to support future expansion.

Despite their preoccupation with radio, T&S decided to `give it a go'.

They found a local supplier of nickel-silver for the springs, while enamelled wire had become available from Rola. After a hassle about quantities, BHP came up with suitably annealed iron for the cores and, much to the surprise of STC, AWA and others, Tasma achieved the 'impossible': an all-Australian 3000 type relay.

Locally made telephone dials were also said to be out of the question, but another Australian company came up with them. In the end, the APO's 'made in Australia' initiative was rewarded with hundreds of thousands of pounds worth of local production, with something like 60 permanent employees involved in Tasma alone.

Price-competitive, and with the advantage of being Australian-made, Fred says that Tasma became one of the firms which finally forced companies like STC and AWA to commit themselves to local production of telecommunications equipment, including complete automatic handset telephones.

This diversification carried over into the wartime years, with Thom & Smith for one, becoming deeply involved in radio and radar equipment for the aimed forces. T&S made transmitters by the hundreds, ranging from 150W to 500W, both AM and FM and from 150kHz to 150MHz.

To emphasise the point, Fred and his son Ian showed me a carton full of instruction manuals, for all manner of free-standing and rack mounted professional equipment — a world apart from telephones and domestic receivers.

In a profile of Fred Thom and Tasma, *Rydges* magazine for March 1, 1952 accords a share of the credit for Tasma technology to their Chief Engineer, Eric Fanker.

It also adds that, in addition to major items like the above, Tasma mass produced smaller items — such as 100,000 relays and 100,000,000 plastic bullet tip cores for .303 ammunition.

"We made all manner of things" says Fred. "You name it, we made it and it performed well in the field!"

Post-war problems

With the cessation of hostilities, military orders lapsed overnight and it was back to civilian telephones — with a huge back-log of new service requirements worldwide, which swamped the resources of overseas manufacturers. If Australians wanted new phone services, Australian firms like Tasma had to provide the equipment — as well as coping with a huge demand for new post-war radio receivers.

This was followed by the Korean war, and already stretched companies were faced with renewed calls for military equipment — to be supplied on a cost-plus 5% basis, with the Government keeping tight rein on the total. In that environment, it proved difficult, if not impossible, to cover overheads.

"Being intensely Australian", according to Fred Thom, "and from a sense of duty", his company went along with the arrangement, diverting a large proportion of their resources for a totally inadequate return — and in the process, compromising normal commercial production and profit!

Fred says that he tried in vain to reason with the bureaucrats, but, aware that they were "on a good thing, they wouldn't come to the party".

With a staffing level of around 800, Thom & Smith were suffering 'appalling losses'. The position was exacerbated by

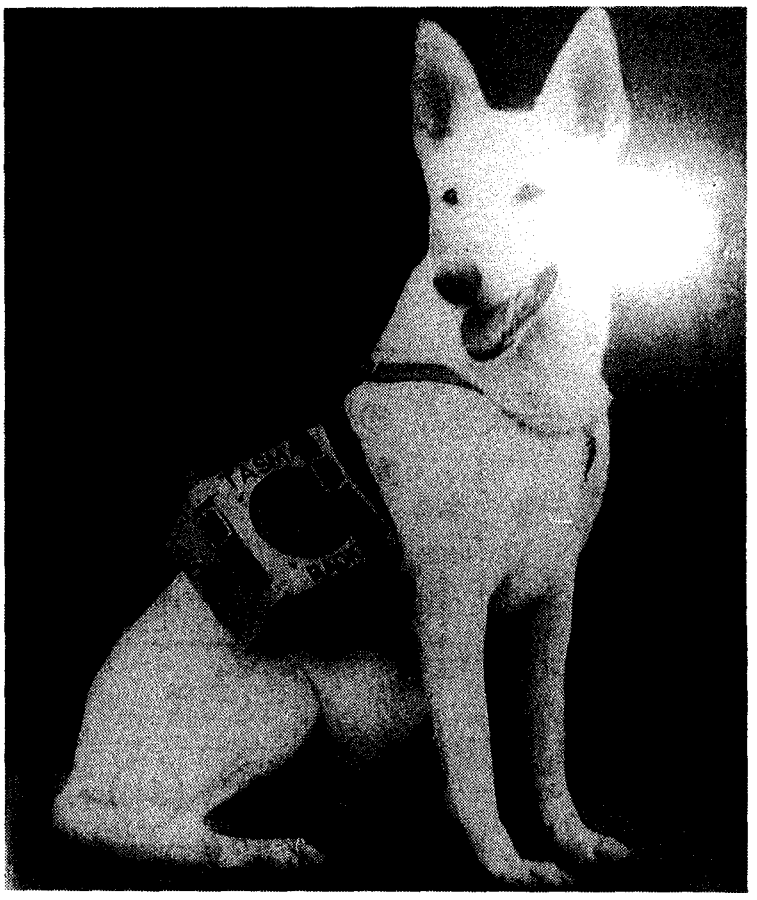

***Fig.6:** The NSW police dog 'Zoe' fitted with a portable radio prominently marked **'Tasma'**. At the time, the idea appeared to have potential for difficult rescue situations.*

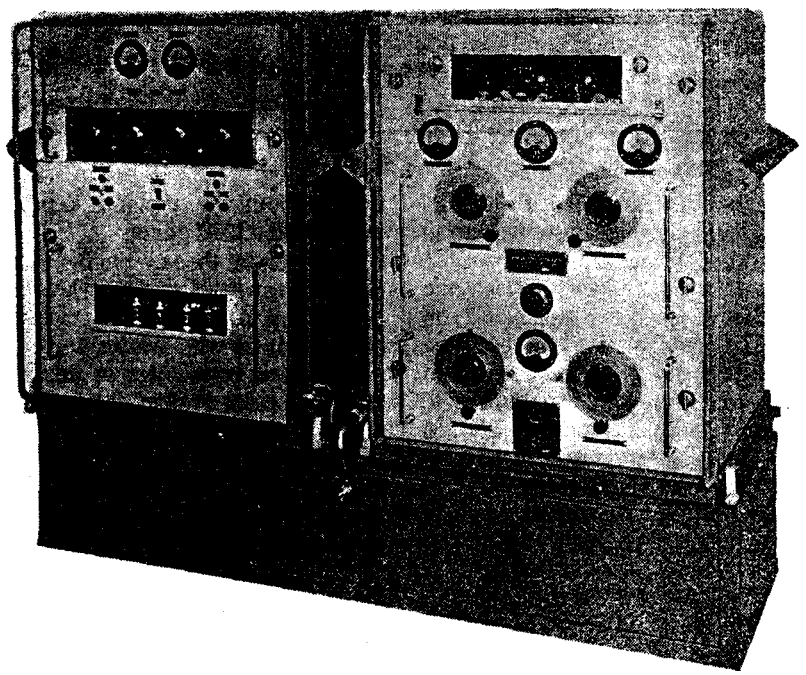

***Fig.7**: Produced by Thom & Smith, the AT-15A was used principally by the RAAF. Operating in the frequency range 150 - 500kHz, the 350/500W transmitter was used mainly for homing and airport control.*

an exasperating strike, and around 195 2/3 the company was faced with a severe liquidity crisis. This was with television looming, and there was no overseas affiliate to which they could turn for support.

Thom & Smith's answer was to merge with President Consolidated, a high profile refrigerator manufacturer. The merger was by an exchange of shares, with Thom & Smith becoming a subsidiary company but retaining its public identity.

The crisis appeared to be under control, especially when Fred Thom managed to negotiate a licence in the USA to re-design, manufacture and market in Australia TV receivers branded 'Motorola'.

But the ink on the licence had scarcely dried when President Consolidated encountered a liquidity problem of its own. Assured that everything was under control, Fred Thom carried right on with the repositioning of his old company for `Motorola' TV production, drawing what assurance he could from the Motorola licence in his pocket and the parcel of President shares that he had accepted in lieu of cash for their part-ownership.

Eventually, however, President folded completely — exposing Thom & Smith as a key viable asset.

At that point, Fred might conceivably have bought back his old company. But, as he says, he had insufficient real `brass' — just a parcel of relatively worthless President shares 'which, with hindsight, he should have unloaded while they were still saleable.

So he had to negotiate the enforced sale of his entire one-time business to the Pope group. Unwisely ("I was a silly bugger") he agreed to the transfer to Pope of the Motorola licence which, with hindsight, he should have re-negotiated for himself. That rendered him redundant, and just over a year later, Pope terminated his services as manager ("I was out on my ear! ").

Pope replaced Fred Thom with another old-timer, Bert Israel. But I gather from the TSA monograph that it wasn't a very rewarding relationship — with Pope, in turn, being taken over by the Simpson group.

Rather than retain Thom & Smith as a going concern, however, Simpsons terminated TV set production, selling up the premises, the tooling and everything.

The historic telecommunications 3000 relay equipment. was purchased by the Spastic Centre and it, along with Bert Israel and a hand-picked group of employees, became an essential component of that organisation's Centre Industries.

Fred Thom, meanwhile, with a few thousand dollars capital salvaged from the debacle, had built a smaller factory across the road from the original Tasma premises in Botany Rd, Mascot.

There he founded a new company, Thom Electronics, taking on board contracts which he could handle with other employees from the original Tasma staff, and without the specialised tooling that had gone to Centre Industries.

Some time later, and by agreement, James N. Kirby bought into Thom Electronics, retaining Fred Thom as manager.

This time around, however, Fred sold a part-interest in the business but retained title to the premises, so that he also became the landlord. Between them, Kirby held rights to the Crosley label, Fred knew how to build TV receivers from the Motorola days, and the Crosley TV range duly appeared on the Australian market.

Realising, as landlord, that the enterprise was outgrowing the existing premises, Fred Thom privately sought and found a much larger factory in the suburbs. After "squeezing the banks and God knows what", he secured a purchase option on it and offered to lease it to **Kirbys** at the existing 'per foot' rate, which they accepted.

So it was, as Fred says, that he "oversaw the production of thousands of television sets" — many of them on his own premises — but always for somebody else. "There were all sorts of Tasma products, but never a Tasma TV".

But as the wheel of circumstance turned, General Electric bought first one third, then another third of **Kirbys.** "And so help me," says Fred Thom, "GE made a mess of it, too. The refrigerators went to Rank and the rest is just a memory".

He concludes: "Fortunately, as General Electric, they still had to rent the factory from me — and that fed me until the operation folded!"

Nowadays other lessees are supporting the Thom family, but the Tasma brandname has passed into history.

Such then is the bewildering Thom & **Smith/Tasma/Thom** Electronics story, as told by Fred Thom himself. Some may see it as an industrial **'whodunnit';** to others it will be but a sad reminder of a fate which befell a whole array of once prosperous Australian electronics manufacturers.