

# When I Think Back...

by Neville Williams

## **Australian radio factories: frequently recalled but sparsely documented!**

Old timers often re-live their personal experiences in Australian 1930's-style radio factories, unmindful of the fact that a formal record of many such enterprises has never been compiled. This is regrettable because, at a time when tertiary education was an exception rather than the rule, those same factories provided basic training for a whole generation of recruits to a career in electronics. Stromberg-Carlson (A'sia) was a case in point.

My original intention in tackling this theme was to adopt a broad approach, involving mainly factories mentioned by correspondents who had made it from assemblers, wirers and testers to meaningful positions in the electronics industry — and/or later in the armed forces!

My plans, however, were side-tracked by — of all things — a news item relating to the last Melbourne Cup! On the day before the Cup was run, the *Sydney Morning Herald* carried a group photo of the Freedman family, who had entered three horses in the race, one of which — 'Subzero' — proved to be the eventual winner.

Not a 'horsey' type, I wouldn't have given it a second thought had not the article mentioned that the grandfather of the clan was Allan Freedman: 'a Yale graduate employed by Stromberg-Carlson' (USA) who had come to Australia in 1927 'to start wireless here'; this, presumably, was on behalf of the aforesaid company.

In the normal way, the name would have meant nothing to me but, coupled with Stromberg-Carlson, it stirred a faint recollection of once having heard of an 'Al Freedman' in that context.

Over the years, I'd often wondered about 'Strombergs' and the relationship between the American and Australian companies; here was a possible clue. Who better to check with than Fred Thom of Tasma — featured in the September-October 1992 issues — who had been associated with Stromberg-Carlson (A'sia) Ltd in its formative years.

Sure enough, Fred Thom remembered

Al Freedman well — from about the time L.P.R. Bean & Co changed their name to Stromberg-Carlson (A'sia). "He was a nice bloke", said Fred, "and, yes,



**Fig.1: Leslie Percival Reed Bean, Managing Director of Stromberg-Carlson (A'sia). (Picture by courtesy of the IREE (Aust.))**

he was interested in race horses, even then; in fact, I think he bought one soon after his arrival!"

Next morning, Fred rang back to say that he had remembered the name of Al Freedman's first Aussie horse; it was

called 'Helmsman'. For an 88-year-old, that's not a bad feat of memory!

From fellow history buff Colin Mackinnon came the further information that Al Freedman was also a keen fisherman, while *EA* Editor Jim Rowe came to light with the photostat of an article by Allan H. Freedman (sic) in the Australian magazine *Radio* for November 11, 1928 entitled: 'The Practical Development of Television'.

To do with the now-obsolete mechanical system, it detailed experiments being carried out by radio station WRNY, New York. (Fig.2)

As one observation led to another, I realised that Stromberg-Carlson (A'sia) was a prime example of a company which had inspired lots of anecdotes and comment, but little in the way of formal history. Perhaps the time had come to set in order the information that we had.

### **Australia-America link**

As indicated in the Fred Thom story (*EA*, September 1992, pages 30,31), Stromberg-Carlson (USA) had been represented in Australia by L.P.R. Bean & Co from the early 1920's, mainly in respect to telephone equipment and radio headphones.

Because L.P.R. Bean seemed intent on promoting Australian manufacture, Stromberg-Carlson had moved to capture some of the action by buying into L.P.R. Bean & Co, which forthwith became Stromberg-Carlson (A'sia).

Fred Thom was unsure of the role of Al Freedman or the financial structure of the reconstituted company, but two things were certain: L.P.R. Bean himself

(Fig.1) retained the position of Chief Executive Officer, while Al Freedman joined the permanent staff as Sales Manager, reporting to Bean.

Fred also recalled how the company had veered from a preoccupation with telephone components to the importation and (later) manufacture of radio receivers, which necessitated expansion of their facilities.

In fact, it was the very prosperity of the venture which prompted Fred Thom and a couple of associates from Strombergs to start up a rival company — Thom and Smith (as per the Sept/Oct. 1992 issues).

For whatever reason, however, the parent company's enthusiasm for the investment seems to have been short lived. According to *Mingay's Radio Trade Annual* for 1939 (p.128), they sold most of their shares back to L.P.R. Bean in the following year, 1928, although maintaining an essentially 'paternal' interest.

For me, the story of Strombergs has always been dominated by observations and anecdotes from process workers at workbench level. If I was to present a more balanced picture of the Company, a wider perspective would presumably have to be recovered from old industry publications such as the one mentioned above.

But that's the way it seems to be for many such companies, with former executives inaccessible or deceased and documentation becoming ever more elusive.

### 'Fifteen bob' a week

Fortuitously, with Allan Freedman still fresh in mind, two letters arrived unheralded on my table. One came from Clive Robbins of Cromer NSW, who was a process worker at Stromberg-Carlson in its early days.

The other, containing a wad of photostats was from Darryl Kasch of

Maryborough, Qld. A keen member of the Historical Radio Society, Darryl seems to have an uncanny perception of what might prove helpful at any given time.

Amongst the photostats was a long ar-

in 1929 which, like 1992, "wasn't the best time to be looking for a job"!

Radio was the only industry that seemed to be going anywhere, and Clive managed to pick up a job at Stromberg-Carlson (A'sia). They were building a neutrodyne receiver, at the time, in a steel box measuring about 18(W) x 12(D) x 8(H) inches. Boasting an 'old gold' finish, it was liberally coated with a greenish 'gunk' and gold paint.

The set came complete with a paper cone loud-speaker which perched on the lid and was marketed as an 'all electric radio', to Clive's knowledge the first Australian receiver of its kind. He continues:

*The factory, on the corner of Park and Riley streets, Woolloomooloo, had two floors, one for the metal work under the control of Jack Smith (later a partner in Thom & Smith, 'Tasma'). On the other floor was a team of kids on fifteen bob a week (\$1.50) doing minor and major assembly. The wiring was done by adults, who had to get their own sets going after completion.*

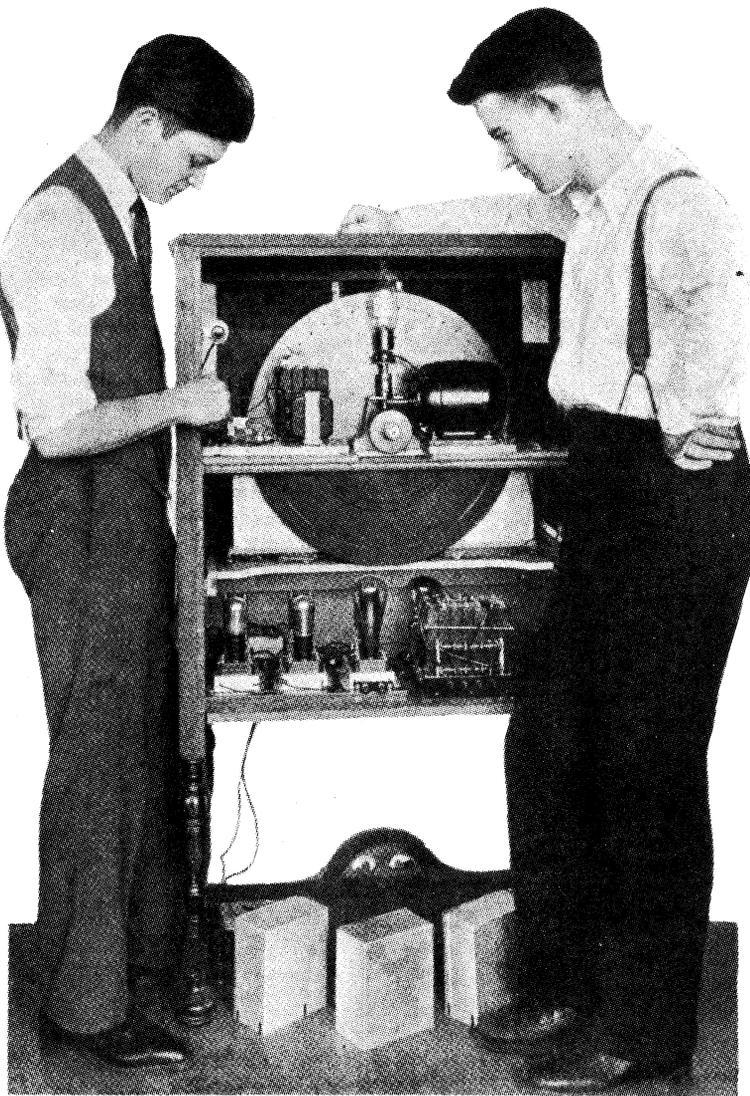
*We were paid by the hour, and would be stood down temporarily if production was held up for any reason.*

(I recall another reader, Ray Brown of North Haven NSW, saying that, in his day they were searched on the way out and fined five shillings for a dry joint!) Back to Clive Robbins:

*There was no union to look after our interests. If anyone didn't like the work conditions, tough! You knew that there were fifty others waiting outside for your job.*

### 'Thou shalt not steal'

Clive Robbins agrees that pinching parts was rife, and they were told on one occasion by the foreman that the employees were to be addressed on the subject by the 'big boss'. They were warned that they must listen respectfully and that, if anybody laughed, they would be sacked on the spot.



**Fig.2: Said to have been involved in the foundation of Stromberg-Carlson (A'sia), Al Freedman took time off to describe experiments in the USA with scanning-disc television in the Australian magazine 'Radio' for November 15, 1928. Shown here is the rear view of a typical receiver.**

ticle from the *Radio Retailer of Australia* (October 16, 1936 p.4) entitled 'Prime Minister Opens Stromberg-Carlson's New Factory'. The sub-title read 'Company Makes Remarkable Progress', the article reflecting its progress to that point. In short, I had to hand prime examples of anecdotal and documented history, covering mainly the early 1930's.

First the anecdotal, which is deliciously typical:

Clive Robbins says that he left school

Describing the scene over the phone, Clive said that this posed quite a problem. He remembers L.P.R. Bean as a stocky man, "about five-feet-three tall and four-feet wide", with a florid complexion that became more so when he got worked up.

He also suffered an 'explosive' stammer such that, when excited, he would not only address employees, but spray them as well!

Clive says he was never quite sure whether 'LPR's' carry-on was spontaneous or 'put-on'. But knowing what to expect, he did his best to restrain himself — to no avail.

As the 'big boss' got worked up about pilfering, his face became progressively more flushed and his oration finally climaxed in one very moist, explosive syllable.

It was too much and Clive burst out laughing — whereupon ten other blokes also 'fell about'. They were all sacked on the spot, cutting short their careers with Stromberg-Carlson.

(I will continue with Clive's letter, because it presents a colourful word-picture of other 1930's-style factories).

By then, Fred Thom and Jack Smith had opened up in Nicholson St, Woolloomooloo, in an old two-storey garage 'down near the wharves'.

The fact that Clive had been fired from 'Strommies' for 'insubordination to big daddy' didn't seem to worry Fred Thom, and he was hired as an assembler. He added that Fred Thom could also 'turn it on' when he got hot under the collar!

In those days, the going rate for first-year assemblers was fifteen shillings (\$1.50) per week; for second-year it was 17/6d (\$1.75) and 27/6d (\$2.75) for third-year. To reach 27/6d, you must have qualified as a tester, being 'too old' for ordinary bench work.

Clive's most vivid recollection from the original Tasma factory was a large vat of fish oil in the downstairs tool room, which Jack Smith had installed for quenching hot metal.

When no one was around, some of 'the lads' used to treat it as a urinal, and the resulting stench when used for its original purpose could permeate the whole place!



**Fig.3: The once familiar Stromberg-Carlson logo. The company name and emblem were heavily promoted in Australia during the 1930's but was swamped by other brands during the 1950's. Stromberg-Carlson (A'sia) folded in the early 1960's.**

## From assembler to manager

As an adult, Clive said he got his 'best ever' radio job at Cliff Black's Olympic Radio as factory manager, for which he was paid the full basic wage. Olympic were producing a dual-wave receiver — one of the first ever on the Sydney market. It sounded magnificent but, according to Clive, had a 'stupid' wavechange switch with an array of nickel-plated fingers actuated with a brass and bakelite key. I quote: "It would work for a few weeks or a few months, depending on how long it took to oxidise!" Olympic persisted with it because they had spent a lot of money on tooling but, while it may have been okay for some jobs, it certainly wasn't suitable for switching front-end microvolt level signals.

Clive said that he argued with his boss and spent several exasperating months developing a compact, self-cleaning rotary wiper switch — only to be beaten to the punch by an announcement from Fox & McGillycuddy that they were im-

porting an even smaller, self-cleaning rotary switch from the USA, produced by Yaxley!

That aside, Clive recalls that radio work was abominably seasonal, with little demand for new receivers during the summer. If you were lucky enough to have a job at the end of the year, you could well be wished a 'Merry Christmas' and sacked on Christmas Eve to save the cost of holiday pay!

In the slack period, process workers would 'go round the traps' looking for a job — any job. You never knew what you'd strike.

In one general engineering firm, Clive says, he signed on for £3/10/0 (\$7.00) per week but, on opening his first pay packet, found only £2/10/0 (\$5.00). When he mentioned this to other employees, they warned him that, if he complained, he would get: (1) the money, (2) an apology and (3) the sack — in that order!

## The coin's other side

And that brings us to the aforementioned article published in the *Radio Retailer of Australia*, for October 16, 1936.

Stromberg's 'new factory' was pictured as a large factory/office complex with a six-bay 'sawtooth' roof in Bourke Road, Alexandria. On the roof of the front bay and extending the full width of the building was the name STROMBERG-CARLSON (A'SIA) LTD — a highly visible landmark from planes flying in and out of nearby Mascot aerodrome.

Attended by 160 prominent identities from the radio and allied trades, the opening ceremony was performed by the Prime Minister, the Rt Hon J.A. Lyons, with the Hon E.S. Spooner, Minister for Works and Local Government representing the NSW Premier.

The proceedings were hosted by Mr L.P.R. Bean, described as the Managing Director and Chairman of the

Company. The Prime Minister and principal guests were duly conducted on a tour of the new factory by Mr Bean and his co-directors, identified as Messrs Breden, Freedman (also Sales Manager) and Eglon (also Factory Manager).

It is hard to reconcile the industrial 'ogre' commonly portrayed by process workers with the L.P.R. Bean, chief execu-

### A cordial relationship? 'Strombergs' in Australia and USA

*I would like to express my appreciation of our partners in America, the Stromberg-Carlson Telephone Manufacturing Company.*

*They have assisted us from time to time not only with respect to technical advice which, by the way, reaches us weekly, but also financially.*

*They took care of us financially in our infantile struggles and when we were endeavouring to entrench ourselves on the market.*

*Their assistance is undoubtedly largely responsible for the position we find ourselves in today. I am very pleased to say that all the loans they made to us were paid back some years ago and, for some years past, the Company has owed no money other than the usual monthly accounts.*

*Today the Company is in a very sound financial position and has moved into this particular factory more as an act of economy than as an act of expansion.*

*L.P.R. Bean (Managing Director),*

*At the factory opening, 1936.*

time, pictured in the *Radio Retailer* article. He doesn't even look 'stocky', let alone 'four feet wide' and, in a conservative business suit, was clearly the central figure of the occasion.

The same must be said of the L.P.R. Bean who attended the IRE World Convention in Sydney two years later, in 1938. He was very much a member of the IRE executive group, headed up by Ernest Fisk and responsible for entertaining industry VIP's from overseas.

For good measure, at the time, he was an MIEE (Eng); MIEE (USA); Councilor of the Chamber of Manufacturers; President of the Aust. Radio Manufacturers Patents Association Ltd.; and also President of the Radio & Telephone Manufacturers Association.

### Keen on local production

As indicated by Fred Thom (September 1992), L.P.R. Bean had long been an advocate of local production and, in the early 1930's, had found common cause with politicians who supported the use of tariffs to protect Australian industries and jobs. This was in the context of trade concessions favouring Empire countries.

It amounted to the very reverse of policies that prevailed in the mid 1970's, when Australia once again became a nett importer of electronic products.

A contemporary article in *Wireless Weekly* suggested that the effect of revised tariffs would be to give normal quality Australian-made parts and receivers a clear advantage over imports from Holland and Germany, but especially over (I quote) 'cheap and inefficient American radio sets, which were not only driving Australian manufacturers into bankruptcy, but which were creating a bad impression of the quality and operation of radio among the general public'.

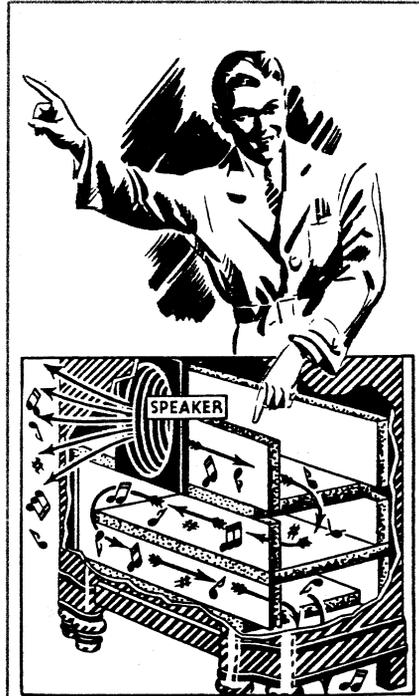
Considerable mutual admiration was evident at the opening Stromberg-Carlson's factory: of (1) the politicians for creating a better climate for industrial expansion, and (2) of Stromberg-Carlson (A'sia) and L.P.R. Bean in particular for generating potential jobs for 500-600 employees.

The formalities were chaired by Mr A. Freedman, as a Director and Sales Manager. Curiously, the article describes Mr Freedman as a BSc graduate from Yale University. It goes on: 'He has not been associated with the Stromberg-Carlson Co of Rochester... He has been with the Australian Company since 1929... and is one of (its) leading executives.'

Further to cloud the issue, Mr E.H. Spooner, NSW Minister for Works

and Local Government, referred in his speech to the role of Al Freedman. I quote:

"We have heard much in the last half hour or so of this company and we are coming more and more to admire its astuteness. We heard first how it relied on our American cousins and brought Mr Freedman here with his capital, and when we had paid him off, he indeed became a freed man and stayed here."



**Fig.4:** 'There is nothing finer than a Stromberg-Carlson' was the slogan which accompanied this advertisement from the *'Radio Retailer of Australia'* for October 9, 1936. Their model 737 was said to be the only receiver in Australia featuring an 'Acoustical Labyrinth' loudspeaker system.

### International support

From the USA came a cable from the President of the American Company, Mr W.M. Angle, apologising for his inability to be present in person and renew the pleasant associations he had formed during his visit in 1927. He spoke warmly of the companies in Australia and Canada that now bore the Stromberg-Carlson name.

In his closing response to the overall proceedings, Mr Bean acknowledged the assistance of the American Company in the terms set out in the accompanying panel.

If there appear to be discrepancies in the above, it was possibly because the participants' remarks on the occasion

had more to do with bonhomie than historical detail. The dominant theme was that Stromberg-Carlson (A'sia) was on the way up.

A special toast, to the Company and its Managing Director, was proposed by Mr Alf Brash, described as Stromberg-Carlson's oldest Victorian distributor. Speaking on behalf of all distributors, he was unstinting in his praise of the Company, of Mr Bean and Mr Freedman. Their relationship had been "a shining example of how modern business should be conducted", and Mr Bean deserved distributors' gratitude for having stood uncompromisingly against "that greatest evil of our industry" — price cutting.

Of Allan Freedman, Alf Brash remarked, *inter alia*, "...believe me, he pushes most everything. He could sell a jinker to Henry Ford!"

If there was any lingering doubt about the company's attitude to its dealers, it would be dispelled by a news picture in *Radio Retailer of Australia* for May 14, 1937. It depicts a special dinner and conference at 'The Bowery' organised by Stromberg-Carlson for dealers in the Newcastle (NSW) area. It was hosted by L.P.R. Bean and Murray Tyler, a prominent figure in the IREE.

The 1939 *Radio Trade Annual* identifies L.P.R. Bean as Governing Director, Allan Freedman as General Manager, Allan W. Scott ASTC as Chief Engineer, and H. Murray Tyler as Sales Engineer, plus a team of back-up executives.

So where did Stromberg-Carlson (A'sia) end up, after this high point? In fact, I'm not really sure.

When opening the new factory in 1936, L.P.R. Bean had said that "We (the Australian company) spent liberally in advertising the name of Stromberg-Carlson (Fig.3) and were prepared to suffer initial losses inseparable from establishing an ethical policy of merchandising. I think it was in 1932 that we restored all of that lost capital and, with the aid of our able distributors like Mr Brash, we have been able to come out on a dividend paying basis ever since".

Stromberg-Carlson (A'sia) certainly maintained an appropriate presence in trade literature throughout the 1930's, with the underlying theme of a new sales feature every year (Fig.4).

Their circuits were also routinely published in post-war service manuals but, despite media involvement, my recollections of the company in the latter period are sparse, suggesting a sharp reduction in promotional publicity.

Questions directed to other oldtimers indicated a similar lack of awareness,

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postwar, and I can only assume the Company's early commitment to promoting its name, image and product had waned. Two of those questioned remembered rumours that Strombergs were 'strapped for cash'. Doug Brown, Electronics Manager for Grace Bros post-war, recalled that Stromberg receivers were not in strong demand on the sales floor.

Having in mind Fred Thom's story of how Tasma had suffered during the war, it is not unreasonable to assume that Stromberg-Carlson (A'sia) may also have suffered a similar financial setback from the 'cost-plus' system.

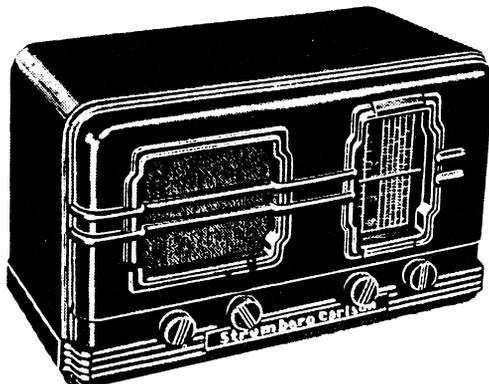
What is not supposition is that, in 1961, one of their representatives rang me at the *Radio, Television & Hobbies* office to ask whether we would be interested in describing a small build-it-yourself electronic organ, using parts which Stromberg-Carlson (A'sia) could supply ex stock.

In principle, I said, we most certainly would. There was a lot of interest in the subject amongst our readers and the opportunity to access a proven design, along with console, keyboard, and other special hardware seemed too good to pass up. But, I asked, how had this opportunity arisen?

The short answer was that Stromberg-Carlson (A'sia) had indeed run into a serious cash crisis. Over the years, I was told, they had become heavily involved in the production and supply of unbranded receivers, to companies which marketed them under their own trading name.

This had led to a diminished emphasis on marketing under the Stromberg-Carlson banner, with a consequent reduction in direct access to the retail market. When savage competition shaved retail and factory profit margins

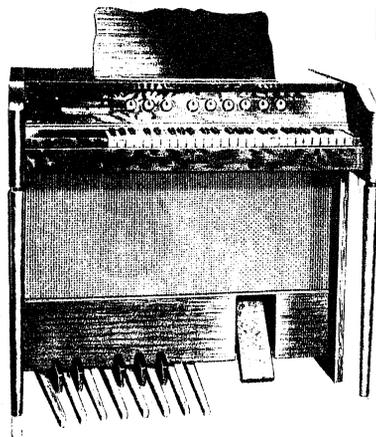
*Launched as the 'Surprise of 1937', Stromberg's first — and possibly Australia's first — moulded Duperite cabinet came in old ivory, lime green or dapple brown and was available with a 5-valve chassis, either dual wave or broadcast band only.*



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**Fig.5: Too little, too late. With little demand for their radio and TV products, Stromberg-Carlson (A'sia) attempted to diversify into electronic organs with the cooperation of the Thomas Company. They finished up disposing of their component stocks to R,TV & H hobbyists, to construct the 'Stromberg-Playmaster' adaption.**

to uneconomic levels, Stromberg-Carlson (A'sia) were faced with cumulative losses. What's more, the problem had carried over into the B&W television era, with the Stromberg-Carlson identity diminished and other companies like A.W. Jackson and KGH dominating the unbranded market.

Casting around for a back-up product, Stromberg-Carlson (A'sia) had reached agreement with America's Thomas organ company to take over an inexpensive valve-based design, which could conceivably find a ready market in Australian homes and small churches. Their idea was that it would set the scene for a more ambitious Australian designed two-manual solid state model.

They were serious enough about the project to produce promotional material (Fig.5) and an owner/service manual, and to begin work on its 'big brother'. However, marketing of the single manual instrument had barely commenced when the company was wound up anyway!

As I saw it at the time, the diversion of component kits to *R, TV & H* readers was a last-minute brainwave by Stromberg-Carlson engineer/organ buff Neville Oates and demonstrator/salesman Bob Swann to divert surplus stocks of organ parts from the tip to the homes of technically minded organ buffs.

In the final wash-up, the prototype of the two-manual model was also acquired by spare-time organ enthusiast Doug Brown of Grace Bros, mentioned earlier.

Ironically, the advert that appears in the May, 1962 issue of this magazine (Fig.5) was the only publicity I can recall having handled for the company — being a by-product of their collapse.

The last word in this sorry tale belongs to Fred Thom. Fred offered no opinion as to why Stromberg (A'sia) folded, beyond the broad assumption that: "when Bean died, the Company simply lost its way". Relating to a man who copped so much anecdotal flack from the factory floor, that sounded like a spontaneous tribute from one of his industry peers! ♦