

# When I Think Back...

by Neville Williams

## Australian Radio Factories - 2: A closer look at Stromberg-Carlson (A'sia)

Our story in the April, '93 issue about Stromberg-Carlson (A'sia) brought to light additional information from correspondents — some of whom are old enough to remember, but still young enough to share their recollections with other readers. As a result, we are now able to supplement our original and somewhat sparse article on this once prominent Australian equipment manufacturer.

Readers may recall that we first became involved with 'Strommies' by a chance reference in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, to Allan Freedman, grandparent of a local turf/racing dynasty which has been in the news ever since their horse 'Subzero' won the last Melbourne Cup.

Back in 1927, the *SMH* said, Grandpa Allan had come to Australia as an employee of Stromberg-Carlson, USA, 'to start wireless here'.

Turning back the clock, we recalled how a prominent Australian PMG engineer had resigned his position circa 1919 to form his own company — L.P.R. Bean & Co Ltd — to manufacture and distribute telephone and 'wireless' equipment. It did well and had ultimately merged with Stromberg-Carlson of the USA in 1927 to form Stromberg-Carlson (A'sia) Ltd, with the aforesaid Al Freedman occupying a key position.

Following publication of the April 1993 article, the indefatigable vintage radio enthusiast Darryl Kasch of Maryborough, Qld, posted me copy of an early 1950's brochure entitled 'The Story of Stromberg-Carlson', prepared by the Australian Directors and detailing how it all began.

It seems that, back in the 1880's, two enterprising Swedish immigrants had met in Chicago. Noting the problems of communication in the huge, sparsely populated country, they agreed that the solution lay in the telephone — but there didn't appear to be much they could do about it.

However, when Alexander Graham Bell's patents expired in 1894, the two men decided to form a joint company to

manufacture 'modern' telephones. Their names were Alfred Stromberg and Androv Carlson.

The company did so well that, in 1903, a progressive group of citizens induced them to move their business to larger premises in the rapidly expanding city of Rochester, in New York State.

### Important company

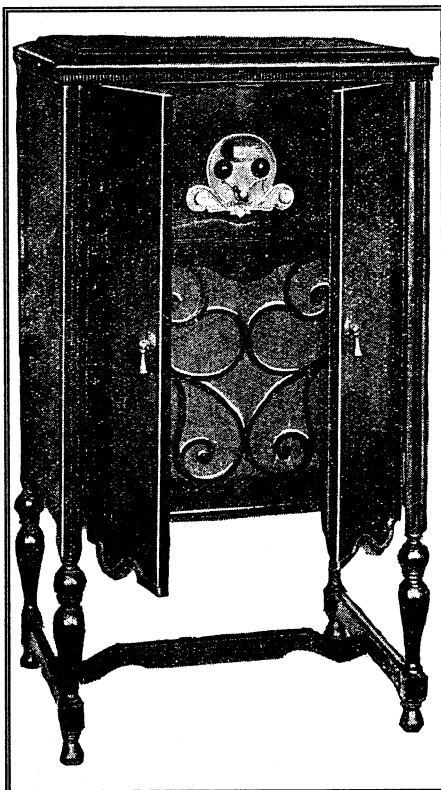
Such was the progress of the Stromberg-Carlson enterprise that, in 1909, it acquired a large slice of the business of the American Electric Company of Chicago. As a result, it became one of the leaders in the US telephone and switchboard industry, with a reputation for producing fine, reliable instruments.

S-C reportedly went on to develop the first self-contained (bell-in-base) handset in America, the first dust-proof dial, the first waterproof phone, the first X-Y switch for exchanges, and more. This was in a market which, by then, exceeded the combined total of all the telephones in Great Britain and France.

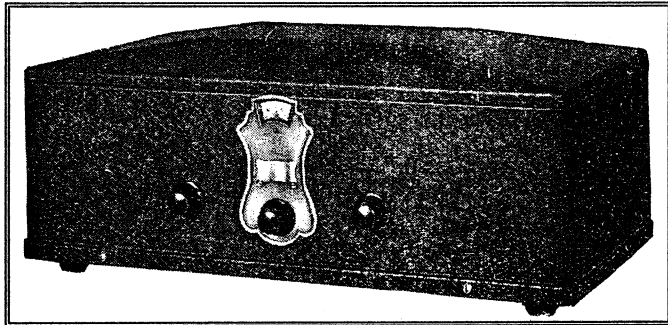
With the emergence of wireless communication came a demand for plugs, sockets and cords, plus headsets and audio transformers able to cope with music. In 1924, S-C launched a successful line of neutrodyne receivers.

According to the brochure, it was the very scale of telephone/wireless activity in the USA that influenced L.P.R. Bean to resign from the Australian PMG Department, to pursue an engineering career overseas. So he headed off to the USA in 1919, with Stromberg-Carlson of Rochester high on his calling list — along with the name of George A. Scoville.

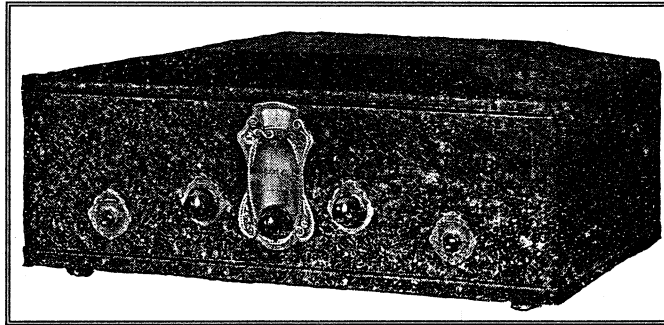
The two had met in 1912 when Scoville, as Sales Manager of the Dean Electric Co (USA), had visited Australia to promote the sale of their telephone apparatus to the PMG Dept. The two had struck up a warm friendship and had kept in touch, with Scoville meantime quitting his job with Dean Electric to



*'Treasure Chest' receivers could be supplied in this polished wood console, at extra cost. The lower compartment could house the batteries and/or a dynamic loudspeaker.*



**Left:** As advertised in 'Wireless Weekly' for May 31, 1929, the Stromberg-Carlson battery-operated three valve 'Treasure Chest' — said to be the first Australian built series to use metal chassis construction.



**Right:** Also from Wireless Weekly for May 31, 1929, the 6/7-valve all electric 'Treasure Chest'. Three-valve and six-valve battery sets were also available, in the same two-tone brown and old-gold steel cabinets.

join Stromberg-Carlson as Vice-President in charge of sales.

## New Aust. company

When Bean arrived at Strombergs in Rochester, Scoville, along with W. Roy McCanne (President) and Wesley M. Angle (Treasurer) sought to dissuade him from pursuing an American engineering career. Their advice, which he ultimately accepted, was to establish his own commercial enterprise in Australia with a view to representing Stromberg-Carlson in a market with which he was already familiar.

So, when Stromberg-Carlson (USA) joined forces with L.P.R. Bean and Co Ltd in 1927, as per our April '93 article, they were buying into a company which had been set up at their own instigation. Controlled by L.P.R. Bean and his wife Mabel, the company had won acceptance as a manufacturer and distributor of Stromberg-Carlson components, even launching into the production of items not manufactured in Rochester.

According to the brochure, Bean made his third trip to America in 1927 and was accompanied, on his return, by Wesley M Angle, in his capacity of Vice President and Treasurer of Stromberg-Carlson, Rochester. I quote: *Together, they formed the company known as Stromberg-Carlson (A'sia) Pty Ltd, into which was incorporated the business known as L.P.R. Bean & Co Ltd.* Bean was to function as Governing Director.

(*Wireless Weekly* for July 11, 1930 notes that formation of the Australian company coincided with a decision by the PMG Dept to adopt English telephone practice.)

What part, then, did Allan Harris ('Al') Freedman play in these negotiations? The short answer is none!

The timing of his arrival (1927) and appointment as Sales Manager prompted speculation, even an assumption, that he had been installed to oversee the inter-

ests the American company. The SMH identified him as a former employee from Rochester, but this was denied in *Radio Retailer of Australia* as far back as October 16, 1936, as noted in our April '93 article.

The *Retailer's denial is supported in letters to hand from Colin MacKinnon (VK2DYM) and from a long-time EA reader, Mr G. Jenkins of Mortdale, NSW.* Having worked at Stromberg Carlson both before and after the war, Mr Jenkins knew both Leslie Bean and Al Freedman very well.

## Bean and Freedman

Bean, he said, was born in Melbourne in May 1884, to a family which had migrated from Yorkshire, UK. He joined the PMG Dept in 1904 and rose to the position of Chief PMG Engineer of Western Australia, and later, Acting Deputy State Engineer for NSW. In collaboration with Joe Lyons (later Prime Minister Lyons) he had been instrumental in organising the Public Service Professional Union.

1919 saw him resign from the Public Service to found his own import and manufacturing business, which was later

to be re-launched as Stromberg-Carlson (A'sia) Ltd. Mr Jenkins says that he was aware of the merger at the time, because two of his neighbours worked for the company and kept him posted as to who had been doing what.

Al Freedman, he said, arrived in Australia quite independently about this same time (1927). At age 25, with a science degree from Yale and management skills from Harvard, he came as a representative of the Pilot Radio and Tube Company (USA) — seeking an expanded market for their components and radios, including the legendary 'Super Wasp' series.

As it happened, Cupid intervened in the way of a shipboard romance, which saw Freedman court and marry an Australian girl — the daughter of 'Midge' McLaughlan, a prominent jockey. She provided an additional incentive to make a permanent home in Australia.

As it was, Freedman met Bean in the course of a routine visit to promote Pilot components. Bean was impressed by his qualifications and manner and, in due course, offered him a position in the new company, leading to his appointment as Sales Manager. But there was apparently more to it.

In a speech by State Government Minister Mr E.H. Spooner, reported in the above-mentioned *Radio Retailer*, Freedman is said also to have invested capital in the company, presumably by way of shares. These were subsequently redeemed by L.P.R. Bean, along with a substantial slice of the interest held by the Rochester partner.

Colin MacKinnon suggests that, with Bean holding at least 51% of the shares, Stromberg-Carlson (A'sia) Pty Ltd could better be presented as Australian owned and controlled.

## First-hand experience

G.J. (G. Jenkins) says that he himself joined Stromberg-Carlson (A'sia) in late

### L.P.R. BEAN RESIGNS!

According to the *Wireless Weekly* Trade Supplement for December 22, 1933, the Board of Stromberg-Carlson A'sia had been sharply divided by issues such as a court case to do with past Neutrodyne patents, and an ARTS&P proposition outlawing the future manufacture and sale of receivers under anything but the maker's own brandname.

Finding himself outvoted, L.P.R. Bean had resigned his position as Managing Director — a resignation that was apparently short-lived.

Could it be that, having taken home his bat and ball, he decided to return to the game, determined buy up the whole playing field?

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1933, when his neighbours tipped him off that there was a job available for the asking, making sub-assemblies. Two years later, he was provided with a multimeter and given the job of checking components on the way to the assembly line, and of checking completed chassis for shorts. This opened the way to final testing and alignment, which he did until war intervened.

In the meantime, Al Freedman had made his mark as Sales Manager and Director. In consultation with furniture manufacturers Ricketts & Thorpe, he restyled cabinets destined for Strombergs in a quest for greater eye appeal.

G.J. also remembers him as a pianist of no mean skill, who later took up the organ. As such, the technical staff respected his judgment about music sound quality, good-naturedly crediting him with having 'standard' ears! (It may also help explain the Company's belated deal with Thomas organs).

On the sporting scene, our correspondent recalls that Freedman owned racehorses Dubonet, Baubon and Morna, which had varying degrees of success on the track. For good measure he also had a passion for golf and bowls.

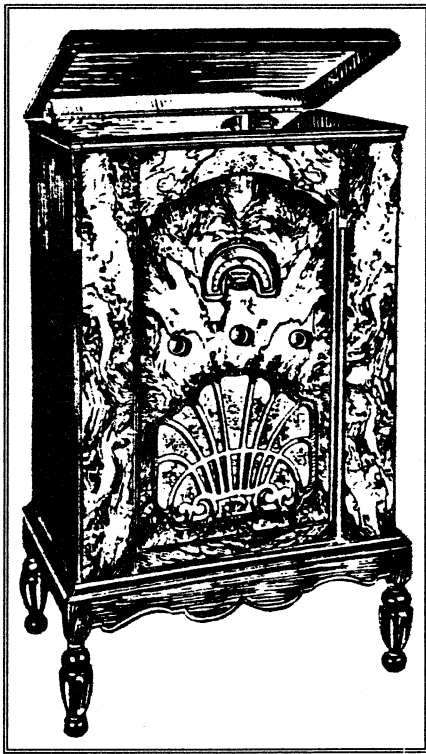
Freedman usually went to the races on Wednesday afternoons and, on one occasion, based on that assumption, some of the sales staff took time off to enter a golf tournament at the Eastlake course. They won and were duly summoned to the dias for the President to present their trophies.

Who should be waiting for them, on the day, but President Al Freedman! Non-recognition was spontaneous and mutual, says G.J. — which was just as well, at a time when the sack was much easier to come by than another job!

As for L.P.R. Bean, Mr Jenkins says that our description of his speech problem was accurate. Far from being 'put on', however, Bean subsequently confided to our correspondent that he had suffered it from his early days. Yes, it had posed a very really problem, but he put up with it rather than avoid public occasions.

### Strombergs in the 30's

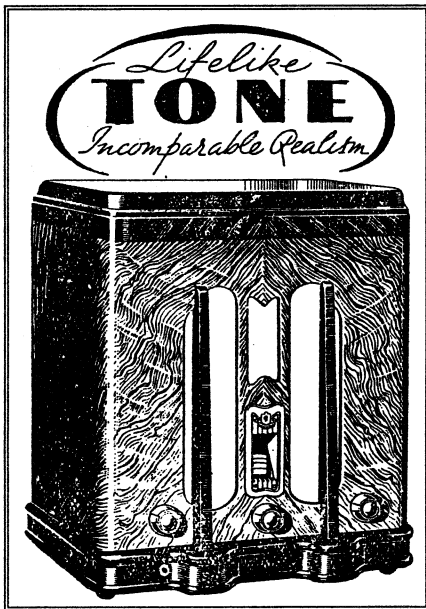
Reviewing life in the Stromberg organisation, Mr Jenkins says that 1931 was the year that put the Company on its feet with the introduction of their first superhet. Designated model NQ492, it used valves type 24, 35, 47 and 80 and had a 175kHz IF channel. Performance was streets head of the equivalent



*As advertised by Noyes Bros, Sydney, in 'Radio Monthly' for May 25, 1932, a superhet phono-radio combination model. High quality sets like this put Stromberg-Carlson (A'sia) among the industry leaders.*

TRF's, and Strommies could not keep up with the demand.

1933 saw the introduction of multi-strand 'Litz' wire which improved the



*A profusion of adjectives peppered S-C's advertisement for this set 'NZ Radio Times' for October 10, 1935. A five-valve table model superhet, it was credited with the sound quality of a full size console.*

performance of tuning coils and IF transformers, while multi-band receivers appeared in 1934. These had a switch problem, which was corrected in 1935 when the Company manufactured one similar to the American Yaxley; it carried through to 1939, when the war interrupted the manufacture of domestic receivers.

As mentioned in our April issue, Stromberg-Carlson (A'sia) opened their new factory in Bourke Road, Alexandria in 1936, but working conditions were initially no better than at Crown St. On winter mornings, the temperature was commonly around zero until 10.00am. On summer days, it could as easily reach 100°F. The installation of sisal insulation and coke burners helped matters, and created conditions where the Company could gradually replace 'boy' labour with adult females at £1.3.0 per week. They proved more dependable than their sons, and a large labour pool was available from adjacent suburbs.

Mr Jenkins says that Strombergs did well through to the late thirties, with a good share of the market — particularly in the country. They were also manufacturing receivers for Philips. (Works Director and Chief Engineer from late 1934 was Allen W. Scott, an early diplomat from the Sydney Technical College).

As production at Philips and EMI built up, production at Strombergs tapered off somewhat and a fair amount of 'staff poaching' was evident. On the other hand, demand tended to even out, moderating the one-time pattern of winter panic followed by summer shut-downs.

According to G.J., Stromberg-Carlson (A'sia) had a 'vigorous' social club in its heyday, with football, cricket and tennis matches, and social dances in the cafeteria. Long service was recognised by presentations by the Managing Director. Mr Bean's patronage, however, tended to make the activities too 'official' and the 'in-house' club was ultimately voted out of existence, to be replaced by occasional inter-company functions.

### War & post-war

Early in the war, the Company turned to the manufacture of Aldis lamps and heliographs, with a couple of specialists from Rochester being seconded to Bourke Road.

1941 saw a complete involvement in the war effort, with an emphasis on telephone and radio equipment for the Signal Corps, a ruggedised 'amenities' dual-wave receiver for the troops, and

the development of enemy radar detection equipment. To house the extra activities, two more sawtooth bays were added to the existing factory, plus a large two-story 'igloo'.

At the end of the war, Government contracts lapsed and S-C management was faced with the need to re-apply their expanded facilities to civilian work. This brought problems with raw material supply and quality, and the need to embrace new skills.

According to G.J., tuning capacitors were produced using printing industry zinc; in service, it oxidised, grew 'whiskers' and developed shorts. Loudspeakers were put into production relying on imported cones; the supply suddenly dried up, leaving Strombergs to duplicate them in their own factory!

Totally new lines included record players made under licence to Webster, USA. Shaded-pole electric motors were added to their range, along with higher powered split phase types. Fans, radiators and pressure cookers were released, along with postwar radiograms — all in an effort to maintain viability until the arrival of television.

But the advent of TV also presented tedious problems, according to our correspondent. The parent Stromberg-Carlson (in Rochester) despatched one of their design engineers to help out, but he/they soon discovered that existing Australian receiver components were not sufficiently reliable under voltage and temperature stress, especially in the numbers required in a TV set.

## Changed priorities

Reading through the new material, I was reminded of Fred Thom's opinion quoted in our April '93 article that, somewhere along the line Stromberg-Carlson had 'simply lost its way'. From a sales-based organisation with a factory attuned to its needs, its emphasis seemed to have veered to a factory with demands that dominated corporate thinking.

G.J. says that the post-war factory was self-contained: it had a 'tool shop, lathe shop, press shop, plating, painting, cabinet polishing, coil winding, design, assembly and testing' — the lot!

Production had been re-organised around the JIT (just in time) system, the brainchild of Director W.C. Hawkins, Comptroller of Stores. Materials were ordered in bulk to ensure a favourable price structure, but with deliveries and payments dispersed at agreed intervals to match Stromberg's production schedules. Hawkins reasoned that inven-

tory stored on site was a liability in terms of space, personnel and capital.

In the factory, dedicated test signals were distributed by coaxial cables from a central source to strategically placed test bays, so that modules could be checked and adjusted as they came off the lines. TV chassies assembled from such modules would hopefully function at switch-on!

There were separate conveyor systems: one to distribute components and modules to the assembly lines, one to step products along the lines, and a third to transport finished units to the bulk store for inspection, packaging and despatch.

With the benefit of hindsight, G.J. sees

### More S-C anecdotes

1. When young prospective employees applied for a job, Bean made them pay a £2 'bond' which he retained until a decision was reached. As 150 - 200 applicants could be involved and there was no haste in returning the money, L.P.R.B. didn't lose out!

2. Bean had a fixation about the blinds being lowered in the Riley Street office, to shut out the afternoon sun. If the young man responsible didn't align them to within 1/4", he would cop a tongue lashing and a 'fine' was docked from his pay. Scrooge could have learned a thing or two from L.P.R.B!

3. In 1924, Bean opposed an application by the WIA to lower the cost of an experimenter's licence: "A person intellectually fit to be a genuine experimenter would not be so impecunious". He added that the mere sending of dots and dashes did not constitute research. He himself had never learned the Morse Code and had no intention of so doing, but he did hold and use a licence OA-2LP on behalf of his company. (He was not popular with the amateur fraternity).

(By courtesy of Colin MacKinnon. VK2DYM)

all this, plus the floating of a public company — Stromberg-Carlson Distributors — as 'grandiose expansion schemes' that locked the organisation into 'vast loans' and a dependency on vulnerable discount retailers.

### 'Hands-on' MD

Despite his advancing years (about 70), Bean was well and truly in charge. G.J. says that the day to day running of the Company was in the hands of a management group consisting of four working directors and depart-

ment heads. It was implemented mainly in lunchtime meetings — with good food — hosted by L.P.R. Bean, who 'generally got his way'...

If one needs any confirmation of Bean's dominance of Strommies (A'sia) I can also quote a letter from Don Taylor of Wahoonga, NSW, who writes as a professional mechanical engineer and a long-time reader of EA with a hobby interest in electronics.

Mr Taylor first met L.P.R. Bean in 1958, when he was involved in the installation of a conveyor system at the Alexandria factory. He sensed that, at that stage, Bean was under pressure from rapidly changing technology. Solid-state devices were making their presence felt, printed circuit boards had arrived and wave soldering was being developed as a corollary of the conveyor system. I quote from Don's letter:

*I recall vividly the role that Bean played in the management of the factory. He must have been the original 'one man band'.*

*Whenever anything had to be developed, changed or decided on the production line, Bean was there in the thick of it. He spent most of his day in the factory, giving instructions to everyone from engineers to process workers. He seemed to know everyone by their first name, and was accompanied everywhere by two staff assistants, to do his bidding and carry his instructions to others in his employ.*

*To me as an outsider, the place seemed in utter chaos; but Bean himself knew exactly what he wanted and exhibited great skills of communication and leadership. Everyone in the factory regarded him as a sort of father figure.*

Consistent with this, G.J., quoted earlier, confirms that Bean's speech impediment diminished in his later years and ultimately disappeared. There is, indeed, a sharp contrast between Leslie Bean postwar, and the man who featured so prominently in the 1930's in anecdotes which process workers swapped at his expense.

Fred Whitehouse of Muswellbrook, NSW, confirms that typical anecdotes, as published, were based on fact. Says he (with commendable restraint):

*I guess it could be said that Mr Bean could be somewhat provocative at times.*

*I recall his ruling about clocking off and on again when visiting the toilet; also being searched after knocking off.*

*He also introduced piece work, with some operations rated at a fraction of a penny. Threepence each was the rate for wiring power packs — I still have a small notebook listing the numbers of*

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*packs that I wired each day. When work was slack, we would be stood down, being recalled by telegram when sales subsequently improved. This happened to me twice, being recalled, on the second occasion, after eleven months!*

### Freedman 'impressive'

What of Al Freedman, the Director/Sales Manager mentioned earlier? How did he react when his carefully nurtured dealer network had to co-exist with a flood of re-badged Stromberg-Carlson receivers?

A letter to hand from Doug Thwaites of Esk, Qld, indicates that Al became an exponent of post-war policy, spelling out in plain terms what I was left to deduce in the earlier article.

By way of introduction, Doug Thwaites says that, with experience gained as a TV trade teacher in the UK he was, himself, brought to Australia by Myer in 1956 to set up a TV servicing facility. He resigned in the following year to take up a position as a teacher in the RMIT, subsequently transferring to Stromberg-Carlson in 1958 as a sales engineer. In the process, he was interviewed at a sumptuous lunch in a Melbourne hotel by Al Freedman, whom he described as a very impressive person looking 'very much like Clark Gable'.

Doug was subsequently flown to Sydney and installed in a Kings Cross hotel — no expense spared — along with a representative of the firm which had been selected to handle the distribution of Stromberg-Carlson products in Western Australia.

They were wined, dined and nourished by lashings of oysters and prawns 'while being transformed into bustling executives, American style'.

From there, it was to South Australia, where Doug's job — with the help of an ex-factory engineer — was to set up a warehouse through which Stromberg-Carlson products could be distributed to SA consumers.

He also had to provide advice by phone to the WA company in relation to technical and service problems. Before TV got moving in the respective states, they did a roaring trade in stereo radiograms.

He says that he was well paid, with an entertainment allowance to cover promotional trips and dealer rallies.

At the same time, with Al Freedman's full knowledge, Doug Thwaites says that he set up a family company — under his wife's name — to market S-C products.

With the arrival of TV, he subsequently set up two other companies, one to supply and install TV antennas for local dealers, and the other to provide back-up TV service. These enterprises proved so successful that he later had to leave Strombergs, to devote his attention to them.

### Formula for disaster

Good for you, Doug. But what caught my attention in Doug's letter was the philosophy which had been communicated to him during the indoctrination session in 1959. To quote:

*Money was no problem. Strombergs had set up the factory as a mass production line to produce their standard TV chassis — real high tech for those days, with a conveyor belt system. The idea was the usual American one: make far more than they could sell under their own name, and sell the rest under other brand names to other firms. 'St James' was one.*

Doug Thwaites ends his letter with a terse observation about the ultimate fate of Stromberg-Carlson (A'sia):

*They had big ideas, but once the initial rush of TV had been fulfilled, they collapsed and soon disappeared from the market.*

To round off the story, I turn back to G. Jenkins. He confirms that Strombergs came unstuck when rival companies undercut their best price for badge-engineered receivers; this, plus the spontaneous collapse of several major cut-price retailers. There was talk of a rescue by American Zenith, but nothing came of it and the finance companies simply stepped in to reclaim what they could from the debacle.

According to G.J., Al Freedman and his son Tony got involved in building home units and government buildings, diversifying later into a stud farm at Yass, NSW. When G.J. subsequently encountered him at various race meetings, 'he seemed to be enjoying his new lifestyle'.

G.J. also kept in touch with Leslie Bean after the crash. He, in turn, kept in touch with the stock market and also remained a councillor of the NRMA well into his eighties.

While conceding that the figures are somewhat rubbery, G.J. recalls that Bean died at age 90 'around 1970'.

One thing only remains to be said: A very big thank-you to the many readers who have co-operated in the preparation of this story — readers without whose assistance it could not have been written. ♦