



A Sydney Royal Easter Show Exhibitor



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The Australian Women's Weekly Theatre Kitchen



Shaking it up

With more money in people's pockets than ever before, the Sydney Royal Easter Show was the place to buy livestock, wear your best frock, do a deal, or simply gawk along with the rest of the throng at the bright new future on offer.

During World War II, the Showground at Moore Park was used as an army camp, but when the Show opened for business again in 1947 over 1.2 million people came out to celebrate. After the hardships and losses of war, they were ready for change. And oh boy (to use a newly imported American term), did they get it. The Fifties dawned and the lights came on: colour returned to fashion and furnishings, new consumer products hit

the market, and on the back of post-war immigration and a baby boom, demand for all goods and services skyrocketed. With a nation to feed and a record wool clip, the rural sector was on the march too. At the great annual pageant that was the Show, all the social markers of the era could be seen at play.

DOMESTIC LUXURY

A new standard of living was on offer in post-war Australia and at the Show, the

Commemorated Hall, the Manufacturers Hall and the Hordern Pavilion were temples dedicated to it. Packed with every new gadget and mod-con, there was something for everyone from housewives to cowhands.

At beautifully constructed stands designed to reflect the atomic age, streamlined appliances gleamed. The dishwashers, refrigerators, steam irons and vitamisers for sale signalled the coming of a domestic revolution that would see women increasingly freed from



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their homes, and a level of luxury in daily living that was previously unimaginable.

But first people needed a home to live in. Responding to widespread housing shortages, clever new materials and construction methods were displayed at the Show. There were DIY pre-fabricated homes to choose from; and James Hardie and Co offered a free book of house plans to go with their innovative product, Fibrolite: the latest thing in economical cladding.

Home interiors were brightening, and in the pavilions, striped wallpapers could be seen along with startling things like an olive-green kitchen with a bright yellow sink. Furniture styles were functional, with simple, clean lines. Many people noted the proliferation of plastics as they roamed from stand to stand. The colourful material lent itself to a million and one applications, it was said, from shearing shed to office to home.

Manufacturing was an attraction in itself at the Show. Several companies set up assembly lines in the pavilions, producing the goods they packed into sample bags. The production line of biscuits, chocolates and sausages could be seen; along with cold creams, lipsticks and mascara.

For country folks, the Show was still the premier place to inspect and buy the latest in farm machinery, but it was the displays of cars that gripped everybody. Vehicle registrations escalated at the rate of nearly 200,000 each year as Australians clamoured for the modern, affordable models. Even with British and American imports, it was impossible to meet demand. Holden cars were pumped out at a rate of 22,000 per year. Despite this, Showgoers in 1950 wanting to place an order were warned delivery could take up to three years. A worldwide steel shortage put a

handbrake on production, but in general, there was a strain on many commodities, as well as infrastructure.

Government departments and agencies took the opportunity to communicate directly to people at the Show, providing information about new projects to redress bottleneck issues. The NSW rail network was to be expanded, and a string of dams built for irrigation and the improvement of water supply. The Snowy Mountains Scheme was also touted. To be completed in stages, the public were told this daddy of all projects would eventually solve the state's crippling power crisis.

NEW FACES

The migrant workers on the Snowy, and the many others who came to Australia, were known as 'New Australians'. At the Show, their presence was noticed. The arts & crafts skills of European women were much admired, and their handiwork boosted competition entries to record levels.

Noticing the different faces in the crowd, journalists asked newcomers about their impressions of the Show. After the deprivation of war-torn Europe, some found the abundance overwhelming. One man from Hungary was surprised by the absence of political posters: 'Here, you are not expected to be grateful for everything on display. In Europe, if you saw a prize cow, there would be a sign on the stall saying, "This cow is very nice, for which give thanks to Stalin."''

This was a time of opening ourselves up to the world. Ahead of the Melbourne Olympics the Royal Agricultural Society of NSW (RAS) introduced Olympic standards to equestrian events at the Show to train our competitors up to international levels. And when a £2 million French exhibition was mounted at the 1956 Show, we were exposed firsthand to haute couture, Citroen cars and myriad other chic products.

Since the 1920s, Showgoers were drawn to displays of the latest communications technology. Radio was still king, but the talk of the 1956 Show was the imminent introduction of television, which would debut in time for the Olympics. In the Wine Pavilion, the ABC set up a demonstration studio, broadcasting to television sets in the Commemorative Pavilion. Programs included documentaries on myxomatosis and chicken canning. Much of the 1957

Show was telecast live, but the RAS feared the effect on attendance and the following year only the official opening of the Show was broadcast.

State-of-the-art business communication systems were also on display. The Postmaster-General's Department proudly showed off the latest teletype machine, capable of sending messages direct between Australian cities at a speed of 66 words a minute.

GETTING TOGETHER

It's hard now to appreciate just how big a deal the Easter Show period was as a social scene. During the 1950s, for country and city people alike, it was an action-packed few weeks. For the wealthy, it was a glamorous social whirl which must have pumped millions of pounds into the city's economy. Many extra events clustered around the Show: the autumn racing carnival, the yearling sales, breed society balls, charity balls, cocktail parties, engagement parties and swish private parties put on just because everyone who was anyone was in town. The smartest venues were booked: the Pickwick Club, the Trocadero and the ballroom at the Wentworth Hotel. It took stamina and a big wardrobe to be at the Show most days and out every night.

So many people flocked to the city that finding accommodation was a major problem. Stories of price gouging were legion. Hotels were expensive and fully booked months in advance. Short term rentals on houses and flats were snapped up even when inconveniently located or in poor condition. Inner city renters routinely found themselves turfed out to make way for higher-paying holiday renters.

At the Show, where all social classes mixed, there was still plenty on offer for those who had to watch their cash. Thousands of people arrived each day carrying picnic baskets. For the tea addicted masses, the RAS provided hot water at strategic places around the ground, so those who came equipped could make their own cuppas. Most sample bags were free, and at the Colonial Sugar Refining stand, children could get free fairy floss wound around a stick of sugar cane. Parents were advised that kiddies could be kept cheaply amused by taking them to see a tobacco company display where a machine made and packaged 1000 cigarettes a minute.

As ever, the Main Arena provided day and night entertainment for all. Despite



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the increasing Americanisation of popular culture, contests of horsemanship and the spectacle of the Grand Parade remained much loved.

BURSTING AT THE SEAMS

Throughout the Fifties, organisers began to worry about the Show's capacity. Each year the number of entries to RAS competitions increased. Commercial exhibitors screamed for more space. And with over a million visitors turning up each year, the Showground's narrow aisles and streets were often jammed. On big days the safety of the crowd was in doubt. By 1959 the population of Australia had jumped to 10 million. Who knew how big the Show would have to grow to accommodate future requirements? But the question was how

to expand. Going up seemed the only solution and at one point a five-storey cattle pavilion was proposed. In the end, a master plan was conceived to gradually modernise facilities, demolishing and replacing inefficient buildings as finances allowed. It was hoped that would do, but already there was talk the Show might have to move.

Throughout the 1950s the positive energy of the Show – and the nation as a whole – seemed unstoppable. At an official opening ceremony, the Governor-General Sir William Slim urged farmers to be daring. 'Now is the time to plough back money into development,' he said.

Based on the evidence all around them, those present must have agreed. Rural and urban Australia was more than ready to shake, rattle and roll. ■