Key to long history

Everyone has a favourite fish and chip shop from their childhood.

Mines happens to be the Silver Key Café in Baylis Street. Little did I know at the time, though, that whenever I stop in there for something to eat or drink, I was participating in a history that reached back 60 years before I was born.

In 1924, the Silver Key Sundae Shop opened at 24/26 Baylis Street under the proprietorship of Samuel Apostol, a Greek immigrant, and his family. The first hint I had that the Silver Key might have a lengthy history was a small advertisement found in the souvenir publication for the "Back to Wagga" celebrations in 1927. It showed a grainy photograph of a man in a shopkeeper's apron standing under the verandah of a narrow shopfront, the sign above him proudly proclaiming, "The Silver Key" and each window displaying a large key.

The advertisement recommended the café to the people of Wagga, saying, "For Attention and Prompt Service - The Silver Key Sundae Shop, Baylis Street, Wagga Wagga".

THE APOSTLE FAMILY

The proprietors of the café, were Messrs Apostol and Akon. Samuel Apostol (Solomos Apostolopoulos) had arrived in Australia in about 1910, from Akra, Greece. He married Miss Vassiliki Economopoulos (Akou) in 1922 and they went on to have five daughters, Koula, Athanasia, Litsa, Mary and Marguerita, and one son, Andrew.

The Mr Akou that Samuel was in business with was probably one of Vassiliou's brothers, as she had at least three who were running the Ridge Café in Tamworth in the 1900s.

By 1923, Samuel was running a fruit shop in Tumburumba, which was destroyed by fire in September 1923. This fire may have been a catalyst for the family to move to Wagga, as Samuel and Mr Akou purchased the brick shop and residence situated at 24/26 Baylis Street from the Buttony estate on May 31, 1934.

By September 13, 1934, the Silver Key was open for business. Samuel placed an advertisement in The Daily Advertiser, proclaiming they had, "The most up-to-date refreshments in town". In recommending their famous cream pastry, the advertisement stated, "A trial is all we ask."

Another advertisement from January 1925 proclaimed that "Sunday tea specials made with our famous ice cream cannot be beaten." Samuel Apostol died aged 46, on October 29, 1934.

The local paper reported extensively on his funeral and included following statement, "Wagga had never before witnessed a congregation of so many Greeks who come to the funeral from a radius of over 60 miles to Wagga to show their respect for their fellow citizen, who was held in so high esteem by every Greek with whom he had ever come in contact, also by every business man with whom he had dealings in Wagga and other parts of the Riverina."

"The cortège, which was a very large one, showed the very high esteem and respect in which the late Mr Apostol was held."

"At the graveside Mrs Apostol, ... said "Goodbye," and hoped that the soil of Australia would give the deceased the same hospitality as the people of Australia had given him."

Café in Wagga

As we think of them today, we have a long history of reincarnations and amalgamations. At various points in time, Australians looking for a sweet snack, a quick lunch or a cold drink could visit a convenor shop, a tea room, a coffee palace, a fish and chip shop, a fruit shop, or a refreshment room, a sunda shop, and even an oyster saloon.

In 1925, as the Silver Key was newly open for business, Wagga had a population of somewhere near to 9000 people. Of those businesses that advertised as a place to eat in the Sands Directory that year, there were seven refreshment rooms, three cafes, one tea room, one dining room, one caterer, one restaurant, one coffee palace, one oyster saloon, and one confectioner.

However, just 10 years previously in 1915, Wagga could only boast three confectioners, two oyster saloons, one tea room, one refreshment room, and one coffee palace.

From various advertisements, it is known that the Silver Key served cream pastries, sundaes, and ice cream in its first 10 years, and the shop itself had a new electric refrigerator sofa table installed in 1929.

By the 1970s, the café had been through various changes to become much more of a fish and chip shop.

In this particular reincarnation, many people would remember Despina and Nikos Kolev's, who ran the Silver Key for many years, and today Kim Nguyen and Thien Dang have now been the proprietors for 18 years.