



UNPUBLISHED

Ref. Number	NBHDC-0387
Author's full name	Cullity, Garrett James
Title	Michelides Tobacco Factory
Publisher	Unpublished
Place	Northbridge
Year	2009
Pages	
Citation	Cullity, Garrett James, Michelides Tobacco Factory, (Unpublished paper, Perth, Western Australia, 2009)
Source/Owner	Garrett James Cullity
Keywords	Industry, Roe Street
Short description of contents	Historical account of the Michelides tobacco factory from 1923 to 1959 including several images
Notes	
Type of file	PDF DOC

INTRODUCTION

For nigh on forty years the name Roe St. was synonymous with the Michelides tobacco factory at the corner of Lake St., and the brothels west of Milligan St. It is curious that the Police closed the brothels in 1958 and the factory ceased production a year later. The story of Peter Michelides and his role in the tobacco industry in WA has been told by others (O'Brien, 'The life and work of Peter Michelides', 1968; Maskell, in 'Portrait of the South West' ed. De Garis, 1993; Appleyard and Yiannakis, 'Greek Pioneers', 2002). This is an account of the Michelides factory in Northbridge from it's opening in 1923 to it's close in 1959.



Battye Library 1936

2009

In 1923 Peter Michelides (1878-1966) and his brother Michael (1892-1953) formed a public company Michelides Ltd, to manufacture tobacco. They started in a small factory on the south west corner of Roe and Lake St¹ (they had previously made cigarettes by hand and sold them profitably for almost twenty years).²

Michelides Ltd built their first purpose designed factory next year alongside the ‘wooden shed’. It was a rectangular two storey brick structure with a 10m frontage to Roe St., and extended north along the back of the four Lake St. houses owned and occupied by Michael and his three sisters. Subsequently two additional buildings were added to form a final complex; in 1933 another two storey factory building also fronting Roe St. flush with the western wall of the 1924 factory; in 1936 an imposing two storey office building with an art deco front which extended east to the corner of Lake St.. The working spaces in the three buildings were separate but from the outside the factory appeared to be a single structure with a Roe St frontage of 60m (a large single storey ‘bond room’ i.e. secure storage for tobacco for excise inspection, backed onto James Street).³

The factory produced ‘tailor-made’ cigarettes (machine made) and cigars, and cut loose tobacco for pipes and ‘roll-your-own’ cigarettes. The cutting and cigarette making machines were on the ground floor and were the responsibility of the men. On the top floor women rolled the cigars by hand and were responsible for the packaging section. Both cigar making and packaging required considerable manual dexterity maintained over long periods and here the women excelled.⁴ Women employees always outnumbered the men in the factory in the ratio of two to one.

Various authorities differ on the numbers employed in the factory. WA Statistical Records list the maximum to have been one hundred and seventy two ‘factory workers’ in 1935-6.⁵ Whatever the exact figures Michelides employed a large workforce before, during and after the Great Depression. Details regarding the provenance of the employees are not available but there is reliable anecdotal evidence that neither a majority lived in Northbridge nor were of Greek background.

¹ This has been described as a ‘wooden shed’. The contemporary photograph shows a structure more resembling a converted shop or house (the wooden shed at the back?)

² In 1904 Peter started making cigarettes by hand in a room near the West Perth railway station (he used a tobacco cutting machine rented at a cost of one shilling for each one pound weight of tobacco cut). Subsequently he continued in a room in Murray Street and Michael joined him some years later. They prospered particularly during the tobacco shortage in the First World War. Even so they must have possessed remarkable marketing skills to launch the factory venture.

³ It was an impressive building embellished by ‘the longest neon sign in the southern hemisphere’, MICHELIDES LTD. CIGARETTE FACTORY, and nearby on the roof a mast flying the Greek flag.

⁴ In 1933 machines were installed to make high quality cigarette papers, the famous Rizla. These were produced in ribbons which the women deftly bundled into small paper packages.

⁵ Eighty six in 1931; one hundred and thirty four during the manpower years 1944-45; one hundred and fifty six in 1951-52. Ninety four employees are present in the splendid 1930 staff photograph taken in front of the factory and published in Appleyard and Yiannakis. In a letter to the Premier in 1929 in regard to tobacco duty, Peter Michelides wrote ‘... [there were] 100 factory hands and 100 more workers were required to make tobacco tins and cartons, and for transport’.

The tailor-made cigarettes were marketed under the brand names of Luxor (probably inspired by Peter's time in Egypt where he was apprenticed to a cigarette manufacturer), London Court and President; the roll-your-own tobacco as Western fine cut, Golden Leaf and Golden Arrow; the pipe tobacco as Luxor pipe flake and London Court; ; the cigars under several names including President. The Rizla cigarette papers were made in conjunction with the French paper manufacturer Ritz La; they were prized by smokers throughout Australia and were a particularly profitable line.

Michelides Ltd was undoubtedly successful until the end of the Second World War; yet it was liquidated in 1959 after four successive years of trading losses⁶. Smokers judged the quality of the cigarettes in the 1940s and 1950s to be 'dreadful' and only to be purchased when no other brand was available; however wartime tobacco restrictions assured sales. The widely accepted view is that after the war superior quality American filter-tipped cigarettes in innovative cardboard packs were imported to WA, captured the local market and were the principle cause of the trading losses. This could well be a simplistic view as the sole explanation for the company's failure; in a failing WA tobacco growing industry the company's large holdings at Manjimup and Pemberton probably operated at a loss, were a capital liability and must have been a factor⁷; in 1955 Peter Michelides was seventy-seven and Michael had died in 1953.

The equipment and factory were sold in 1960; the impressive buildings still stand (2002) at the corner of Roe and Lake St. although no tobacco has been produced there since 1959. Peter Michelides served on the Board until the liquidation. Michael had played a major role in the company⁸ until his death but certainly did not attain the public recognition in the tobacco industry accorded his brother.

⁶ Accumulated losses of 198,000, 1956-59

⁷ Michelides grew more than half the tobacco grown in the South West (SW) and produced more than enough to satisfy the factory requirement for cigarette production. It is likely that all their cigarette tobacco was sourced from the SW. Problems with the quality of the SW tobacco first became evident in 1942-43 and led to the Eastern States buyers rejecting an increasing percentage of the crop during the 1950s.

⁸ Michael's son Spero (Spike) Michelides, in an aural history recorded for the City of Perth in 2002, asserted that his father was the financial pillar of the company.



The factory stage 1 fronting Roe St. (left). The 'wooden shed' at the corner abuts the first of the houses in Lake St. (right). Note the famous neon sign and the Greek flag . Battye Library 1924



The factory stage 2 facing Roe St. and Perth Railway Station. This aerial photograph shows the bond store extending to James St. Evidently cigarette papers were being manufactured..

Battye Library 1935



Rolling cigars in the upper floor (note the four men).

Battye Library



Feeding tobacco leaves into a rotary cutter on the ground floor.

Battye Library