

F. G. ROBERTS HISTORY



F. G. Roberts (1892–1977) an influential and renowned naturopath, dietician, chiropractor and educator operated the original manufacturing facility from 1936 to 1952, to service his Australia wide chain of shops and clinics. Some of the latter (Ipswich and Bundaberg) remaining in the same ownership from the late 1930s to the late 1970s and, one in Ballarat, into the early 1990s.

F. G. Roberts embraced a philosophy of holistic health care including diet, nutrition, exercise,

adequate rest and spiritual wellbeing. Roberts favoured whole minimally processed and minimally refined foods and cereals including plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables: an anti-cancer diet rich in potassium containing and high dietary fibre foods. Roberts believed that wholegrain cereals with their germ and bran intact provided essential vitamins, minerals and roughage or fibre normally removed with the bran and germ. He favoured high dietary fibre foods for several reasons. They bulk up in the stomach providing a satisfying feeling of fullness to restrict food intake while also lowering the energy density of the food. In modern parlance, they restrict calorie intake which assists with weight control. They also slow the rate of digestion and assist the passage of food through the digestive system. They prevent issues with constipation and keep bowel motions regular and easy. He was strongly opposed to highly refined and concentrated proteins like gluten and soy isolates because of the loads they impose on the kidneys. He was opposed to refined and de-natured oils, sugars and flours because they often required additional energy to digest and, not only being deficient in essential minerals and vitamins, they often tended to rob the body of further minerals etc. in their digestion.

As a Seventh Day Adventist, Roberts inclined towards vegetarianism and was fascinated by the work of American surgeon, Harry Willis Miller, in China with infants and children using soy milk. Upon returning to the U.S. in the mid 1930's Miller was instrumental in formulating the Lorna Linda Soy Infant formulas. Products which, along with F. G. Roberts' Soy Compound (first manufactured in 1935-36 with American soy ingredients), continue to sell to this day. In addition to Australia wide distribution, Soy Compound has been exported to New Zealand since 1953.

Roberts who treated many children with colic, eczema, mucus and myriad other health problems saw a role for using soy in combination with dairy ingredients. He considered soy and dairy proteins as complementary and that Lactose (present in the milks of most suckling mammals including humans) assisted in the assimilation of calcium and brain cell development in young animals and did not promote dental caries.

During the 1930s - 1950s in addition to F. G. Roberts branded food products there were a wide range of herbal tablets and other herbal remedies for making infusions etc. many of which were retained by Roberts at the handover of the business. Some of these latter products fell victim to changing Health Regulations and others to the fact that the company did not employ a prescribing natural health practitioner. Several herbal type ointments including Mallow and Elm (a drawing ointment), Skin and Healing Ointment and Vita Balm (a heat rub) were excellent products and remained with the company. Eventually these were to succumb to a

combination of factors including lack of fit in a food manufacturing context, low volume and use by date issues and, in the case of Vita Balm, to problems resulting from a change in the treatment of the imported chillies ingredient which destroyed its unique deep heating effect.

The food and beverage type products included Soy Choc (a cocoa flavoured version of Soy Compound), Soy Bev (a roasted soy/chicory coffee substitute), Neuro Vita (a soothing nerve tonic/nightcap), Molasses (a blend of Molasses, Treacle and Honey), Glantone (a mixture of Treacle and Honey with added Slippery Elm), Soy Beans in Tomato, Alfalfa Tea (an alkaline, mineral rich tea made from Lucerne or Alfalfa roasted with Malt), Malted and Vita Bran (wheat bran roasted with malt), Vita Elm (a porridge or drink made of a mixture of steam stabilised whole grain flours with added slippery elm), Vege, Onion, Garlic and Celery Salts. While promoting balanced and quality nutrition there was always an awareness of the importance of the palatability and enjoyment of food and its social aspects.

V.R. Smith met Roberts in 1946 at a public lecture given by Roberts in the Athenaeum Building in Collins Street, Melbourne and later, went to him for personal treatment. Roberts and his wife, Gladys, were to play an important role in the prenatal preparations for the births of the Smith family's two sons, Paul in 1949 and Ross in 1950, and in Mabel Smith's post natal care. The two families interacted socially. Roberts also assisted the Smiths to establish their first garden at their new home in Blackburn South: a spectacular massed planting of marigolds and zinnias inter-planted with Alistair Clarke's superb, scented, pink "Lorraine Lea" roses.

From 1952 to 1954 V. R. and M. Smith (Ron and Mabel) were in partnership with F. G. Roberts to run the business on a day to day basis. The Smiths bought Roberts out completely in 1954 and renamed the company "F.G.R'S Health Food Products Pty. Ltd." which traded in this guise until 1974 when it ceased to trade. Its activities absorbed under the Soy Products umbrella with the F.G. Roberts name being retained as the brand identity. The company continuing to service F.G. Roberts' national chain of stores and clinics well into the 1970s as well as other Health Food wholesalers and chains and Safeway's venture into health foods following its takeover of Don Newsome's Bourke Street Mall "Naytura" Store. The term - "Naytura" - having been coined by Roberts and his wife Gladys in 1933-34 in respect of their "Natural and Curative Dining Service" located in Little Collins Street, Melbourne from the 1930s to 1970s, under various ownerships, until it was relocated in the Mall. The Roberts's also operated several rest cure facilities under this umbrella.

In 1954, the Smiths bought a 3 acre (1.15 hectare) site at Bayswater, to the east of Melbourne, and built a steel clad storage shed to store their soy beans. They also moved the business to much larger rented premises at 146 Burwood Road, Hawthorn where it remained until 1968.

In 1957, Soy Products of Australia Pty. Ltd. was incorporated. In December, 1963, a new four storey soy flour mill commenced operation at Bayswater. Initially the Smith family, Ron, Mabel and their two teenage sons ran the flour mill on weekends. This revolutionised the productivity, quality and production of the soy flour and other ingredients used in house. It also significantly reduced the strain on the rest of the company's manufacturing facilities and personnel. However, it imposed other difficulties in that the company now operated at two different sites. A difficulty that was resolved in April 1968 when the entire operation was moved into a new single storey office, warehouse and retail blending and packing facility adjacent to the original storage shed and flour mill at Bayswater.

The Smiths were to add Cider Vinegar and several additional retorted and canned products to the range including Lima Beans in Tomato, Lima Bean in Aspic, Soybean Luncheon Loaf and Savoury Roast, using soy grits but without peanuts or gluten. They also began to sell soy beans in bulk for counter sales and later for traditional soy milk and tofu production. Later a Muesli product was developed: the first to go on the market in Australia.

At this stage the company had a diverse range of products, all short run, low in volume and mainly labour intensive. By 1972, when Gough Whitlam and the Labour Party swept to power, the company had 35 full-time employees working two shifts a day with attendant supervision issues. It was difficult to find people with the requisite skills who were prepared to take the responsibility. All this proved extremely difficult to sustain under the new wages, increased holiday pay, redundancy, long service leave provisions etc. introduced by the new Labour Government. Some products were discontinued almost immediately and others were capitalised and automated to reduce labour dependency and costs. The company also wound back to a single shift to avoid penalty costs. A trend that continued as mill production increased and required more floor space for storage of its multiplicity of outputs. For space and capital, simplicity and hygiene reasons all the wet type products were progressively phased out and the company steadily moved towards becoming a specialist producer of various flours and powdered blends.

By the early 1980s the company had developed a sizeable business in selling bagged soybeans in bulk. Malcolm Green started up the Tofu Shop at 78 Bridge Road, Richmond in 1981 to become a loyal and long term customer. With the influx of Asians into Australia in the 1970s there was also growing interest from them in making soy milk and tofu. Shortly afterwards Earth Angel and Simply Better Foods with Australian owners also entered this market. Many of the buyers were focussed on price at the expense of quality and continuity of supply. There were issues of lack of loyalty, haggling on price, slow payment, failures to take the stock ordered, the risks, storage and finance costs of servicing a fickle, price sensitive market. In the end we serviced only those few customers who respected and appreciated what we did, the service and quality of product provided, were prepared to pay for it and to honour their contracts. We could not afford to support those who took us for granted and only came to us when their cheaper suppliers ran out.

In April 1980 Paul Smith, who had been appointed a Director in 1977, joined the company in a full-time capacity. During the 1980's there was significant development and expansion of the flour milling operation and the range of products and ingredients produced including steam stabilised wheat bran and germ, soy fibre flour and buckwheat flour.

In January 1982 Soy Products (Sales) Pty Ltd was established as the trading arm and Soy Products of Australia Pty Ltd became a holding company.

In 1990 Paul completed an MBA Degree and during that year had become interested in gluten free products through a chance attendance at a Coeliac Society meeting. Paul was introduced to the meeting by the speaker and discovered a great interest in and demand for commercially produced gluten free flours and other mixes. There was a do-it-yourself recipe for making gluten free flour, using the company's debittered soy flour as an ingredient, on each person's seat. The F.G. Roberts' range of gluten free products evolved from here. After doing some research Paul immediately resolved to go totally gluten free. At the time, a gluten content of 3 grams per kilogram was legally permissible (i.e. gluten was deliberately being added due to its functionality) despite the fact there was a growing body of evidence suggesting that this was not desirable. New products, packaging, recipes and specifications were developed and the whole bias of the business began to change as it progressively moved to become totally gluten free and wheat free.

During the 1990s Paul introduced a completely new product costing model and an innovative full serial batch tracking system for all inputs and finished products that was fully integrated with the accounting system. All invoices, laboratory reports etc, being referenced with the serial batch number.

Later, in 1998, Paul took an interest in a prospective customer making antipasto ingredients, pesto, dips, falafel and vegetarian burgers using faba beans, red lentils and chickpeas: all of which were gluten free and formed a logical extension to the company's activities. Paul did considerable research and product development in the hope of getting further milling and blending business. Soy Products enhanced his product quality, productivity and significantly reduced fat absorption in his deep frying to no avail. What should have become another promising and long term relationship faltered quickly due to his failure to act in good faith. However, while this was disappointing it had built the businesses' knowledge base and created new product and market opportunities. The company had developed and modified its flour mill to accommodate the milling of the chickpeas, faba beans and other specialist grains and legumes. Chickpeas, when dehulled, being among the least allergenic foods known to man. During the next few years we were to build a sizeable new part of our business based upon chickpeas only to have much of it disappear due to severe drought induced shortages of raw material, high prices, lack of continuity of supply and raw material cross contamination.

In 2003 the company became HACCP, Kosher, Halal and Organic Processor certified with all F.G. Roberts' products being Kosher and Halal certified: totally Vegan/vegetarian with no animal or alcohol ingredients or manufacturing aids. The company taking its gluten free, low allergenic and Kosher/Halal status very seriously. The various certifications having been integrated under the HACCP system in order to streamline and co-ordinate their application. We sought to apply simple, universal solutions to meet the various requirements and avoid confusion and unnecessary complication.

For example, we developed a cleaning and work scheduling protocol that accommodated the issues of strong colours, strong flavours, allergen control, our Organic Processor and Kosher / Halal status. We have a strict, totally gluten free regime and all ingredients on site are, without exception, gluten free, wheat free and both Kosher and Halal approved. We also adopted an uncompromising and totally organic approach to insect control throughout the entire premises using pheromones, blue lights and silo aeration rather than pesticides and fumigation etc..

The company has staunchly and proudly maintained Roberts' opposition to the use of artificial flavours, flavour enhancers, colours and preservatives etc. throughout its entire history. We also take carefully into consideration such issues as salicylate intolerance, fructose mal absorption and the anaphylaxis affects associated with certain foods and preservatives. Added sodium, fat and sugar are also kept to the minimum. The products generally meet diabetic criteria for sodium, sugar, fat and dietary fibre levels as many coeliacs/ce-liacs are also diabetics. We believe that our whole nation would benefit from adopting a diabetic diet.

The company prides itself upon producing products with remarkable consistency of flavour, aroma, appearance, nutrition profile and functionality and excellent, natural shelf life based upon low water activity. While they make good tasting end products our flours and other mixes have deliberately been made as bland and neutral in flavour as possible to permit their use in both savoury and dessert applications and to enable the user to select their choice and level of added ingredients based upon the required outcome and/or their health needs and specific dietary requirements. We do not impose. We give you the option.