

NAME: FRANK WALTER BLAKE VALE

BORN: 26<sup>th</sup> October 1908

"TOORA: South Gippsland, Victoria  
(one of 12 children [12<sup>th</sup> man])

## HISTORY

Franks' parents and their children lived on an estate at Tarwin Meadows, a large dairy property with 1000 cows, his father being a bookkeeper for the business. Frank attended school at Tarwin Meadows, finishing school in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade at 14 years of age, obtaining his merit certificate with a high rating. On leaving school Frank assisted the family milking cows for 2 years (family share dairy) during that period he stripped black wattle bark and for the first time was paid wages for this work.

On the dairy property, the family operated the Tarwin Meadows Cheese Factory, and as a result of Franks' enthusiasm in stripping bark, and his keenness to work he was offered a permanent job in this small factory. Over the next 2 years he continued to milk cows while being trained in all aspects of cheese and butter manufacturing. When the manager of the nearby Coralyn Cheese Factory became ill, Frank accepted the position of Acting Manager. During this period his knowledge and training within the industry resulted in him qualifying and being awarded various certificates, and this gave him the authority to purchase milk and cream and the qualifications to manufacture cheese and butter. This was the start of Frank's life in the Dairy industry.

During those early years of Frank's career he first learnt about refrigeration while attending to the various factories refrigeration plant. This, along with his need to have some understanding of accounting, similar to his father, activated him into studying engineering and accountancy at the working man's college (now the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology - RMIT)

During 1936, Frank, along with his new wife (Flo), left for Hamilton Victoria to take up his new position as General Manager of the Hamilton Butter factory. During those years, under Frank's aggressive management style, his interest in growth led to the acquisition of dairy factories along with the South Hamilton Freezing Works in 1950. The company had now developed into one of the state's largest producers of cheese and butter for local and export markets. The company also manufactured ice cream and ice, and installed an automatic ice manufacturing plant along with developing the companies' cold storage business: eventually the company became Murray Goulburn.

In 1952 Frank was offered, and accepted the position as General Manager of Woodmasons Limited, a public listed company, and in 1953 he was promoted to Managing Director. At that stage Woodmasons was one of the largest ice manufacturers in Australia. During this period, the sales of block ice manufacture for ice chests was staring to decline rapidly with the advent of the domestic refrigerator. To combat this, Frank, with his usual ability, developed the crushing of block ice and marketed crushed ice in plastic bags. Woodmasons was the first to develop the automatic coin in slot ice vending machine at each of their factories.

Profits of their business were then being channelled into cold room development, particularly as ice sales continued to decline. Frank introduced a program to extend the cold storage side of the business, particularly in the low temperature storage area. This necessitated a conversion of existing rooms to be able to operate as freezers, and required the converting of bare pipe coil rooms to forced draft systems with liquid recirculation.

Woodmasons again was one of the first to make these changes, resulting in higher efficiency with plant rooms being automated so as to run unattended. This move was widely accepted and appreciated by clients such as poultry processors, Steggles and Birdseye who required this to facilitate the growth of their business.

During the late 1950's, Frank followed the experiments being carried out by engineer Stan Dunkerly on his property for the quick freezing of peas for Pict Frozen Foods. With domestic refrigerators and freezers now well established, frozen food manufacturers were developing at an aggressive rate, and the requirements for quick freezing facilities and freezer storage needed to be developed. Frank developed a close association with Stan, which provided Frank with the opportunity to build a blast freezer at Woodmasons Oakleigh plant, allowing experiments to be carried out on quick blasting freezing of peas. In conjunction with Stan Dunkerly and Dr James Vickery, C.S.I.R.O. of North Ryde, Frank developed procedures on the research of quick freezing vegetables.

Adopting those procedures, Woodmasons embarked on the large scale freezing of vegetables and poultry. Frank also experimented with plate freezers for the quick freezing of export meat in cartons, resulting in no expansion of meat within the carton, and avoiding the bulging of the cartons. This offered tremendous advantages for the handling and stowing of cartoned meat. Business also commenced to boom in frozen peas, resulting in Woodmasons converting old chiller rooms into freezers. Frank Vale was responsible for inviting Dr James Vickery from the CSIRO to many CSAA Cold Storage Conferences as a guest speaker giving members an insight to the many areas of research and procedures for the storage and handling of frozen foods.

During 1960 Woodmasons acquired a large parcel of land at Dandenong for future cold storage development. Also during 1960, Michael Rudnev of Brisbane, with assistance from CSIRO developed the first insulated sandwich panel. Rudnev presented his panel technique to the 1962 Commonwealth Cold Storage Conference at Surfers Paradise. Delegates at that conference were not enthused about the system and felt the insulated panel would never take over from the conventional method of construction (brick and mortar). Frank, being an innovator, had reviewed the panel construction and liked what Rudnev had developed, and saw tremendous opportunities with the system, particularly as this offered the chance to develop cold rooms at about 1/3 of the cost of conventional methods. Offering advantageous design benefits with reduced construction time being a large component.

Frank also envisaged that with Woodmasons recent acquisition of land at Dandenong, along with the unprecedented growth and requirement for specially constructed cold rooms, coupled with the ability to use forklifts and racking system for the handling of large volumes of bulk product, would clearly give Woodmasons a distinct competitive edge bearing in mind that most commercial cold stores were operating close to the inner suburbs of Melbourne, built of brick construction, and in some cases multi storey, and were manual stacking product in rooms. Everyone believed that Woodmasons land at Dandenong was too far out of Melbourne; however this suited the dairy industry as it was closer to production areas and offered fast turnaround for transport.

By the time 1962 arrived, Frank was constructing Australia's first prefabricated cold rooms. The layout and design enabled the handling of large volumes of product with the full use of forklifts with all product being on pallets or bulk bins. On site quick freezing of product was available with well-constructed blast tunnels and plate freezers. This pioneering effort of Frank's offered the frozen food manufacturer, dairy industry and meat operators tremendous cost savings and a very competitive base in the handling, storage and export of their commodities to compete in national and overseas markets.

Woodmasons developed 3.5 million cubic feet of cold storage at Dandenong and in 1969 acquired land at Lidcombe, NSW and developed a large prefabricated cold store on that site. Frank Vales faith in this new type of construction and his willingness to give it a go revolutionised the construction of colds stores in Australia. It has been widely acclaimed in Australia and overseas with the Dandenong development of the larger cold store and the entry as to what we know as the modern cold store of today. The Woodmasons of yesterday, a listed public company has developed into the Woodmasons of today. The largest cold store operation in Australia at this time (1975). Woodmasons remained a public listed company until the acquisition by the company of John Swire & Son.

Frank Vale in his business career was a progressive innovator which brought tremendous benefits to the cold storage industry. His lifelong involvement with the dairy industry and has allowed that body to have a close liaison with the cold storage industry. Frank was awarded a life membership to the Dairy Institute Victorian Division.

### **Memberships and Affiliations**

Past Chairman of Australian National Committee of the International Institute of Refrigeration (IIR Aust) for 4 years

Committee member Australian National Committee of the International Institute of Refrigeration (IIR Aust) for 20 years

Recipient of the Thomas Mort Award from IIR Aust

Represented the Cold Storage Industry on the Executive of the Employers Federation for 15 years

Involved with the Cold Storage Association Australia – CSAA (now RWTAA) and CAII (Ice Association) and awarded Life Membership

WRITTEN: 27<sup>th</sup> April 1999