

THE PLUG FAMILY BUSINESSES

Aart Plug

The Plug family has its roots in Katwijk aan Zee, a fishing village along the North Sea coast of Holland. The two brothers Dirk Plug (b. 1903) and Jan Plug (b. 1906) had spent their childhood at sea, and each had established successful businesses related to the fishing trade in the Dutch port of IJmuiden. In the aftermath of World War II they made plans to migrate to Australia with their families, with the intention of starting a fishing venture based in Albany. At the time, there were severe restrictions on taking currency out of Europe. Consequently, along with the usual household possessions, they brought with them two fishing boats, a small truck and other equipment. In addition to their own families they were accompanied by their widowed mother, a married sister with her family and three unmarried siblings. They arrived in Fremantle on board *MS Sibajak* in 1950.

In any event, the fishing venture, as originally envisaged, never got off the ground. Dirk Plug and his family moved to Spearwood, near Fremantle, where he and his sons established themselves within the WA fishing industry. Their activities ranged from Dongara to Shark Bay, and more recently some members of the family have been based in Rockingham and Fremantle. Right up to the present, the Plug family name is still quite well known in the WA fishing, boatbuilding and marine industries.

My father Jan Plug was more of a businessman. In 1954, he set up a small grocery and general store on Marbellup Road, in the new State Housing development of Mount Lockyer, on the outskirts of Albany. My mother Jacoba Anna de Zoete was much younger than my father. She was a city girl, and had rather more business education than was common for young women of her time. In addition to raising a large family, she played an active role in running the business.



Figure 1
Plug's Save Way store
Courtesy: Aart Plug.

For its time, Plug's Store was a typical family-run neighbourhood shop. There was no self-service in the early years – it was all personal service from behind the counter. Most of the staples (such as sugar, flour, biscuits and cheese) were delivered to us in bulk and were weighed, packed and sold by the pound. The family dwelling was at the back of the shop. Each of us in the family had our own chores – mine, among others, was to make up and dispense threepenny and sixpenny bags of mixed lollies to the local children after school. My two older sisters worked as full-time shop assistants.

The neighbourhood trade was steady if not spectacular. I suspect that quite a few customers came to us when they ran out of credit at Adams' Four-Square up the street. But a good part of our business came from the Dutch families living all over Albany. In an ancient and decrepit Hillman quarter-ton ute, my father made his rounds, picking up a weekly order on Thursdays and making the delivery the next day. For many of these families, this was a very useful arrangement. The mothers were at home all day, with no access to a car. Groceries were delivered, and my father, who was sociable and talkative, provided a welcome break to what was often an isolated and tedious daily existence. I have vivid memories, as a very young child, of tagging along with my father on these weekly expeditions. Saturday mornings were a busy time in the shop, often with more Dutch spoken than English. Our business must have done well, because within three years my father had bought a brand-new Holden station wagon.

One great highlight was our stock of imported Dutch foods – baked goods, meat and smallgoods, confectionery, and the like. The Dutch families were not accustomed to Australian cuts of meat – steaks, chops and snaggers – and much preferred the traditional Dutch cuts. We had an arrangement with a Dutch butcher in Perth: weekly orders of fresh meat cut in the Dutch style, *spek* (cured fat bacon), continental sausages, smoked meat and other smallgoods were shipped down from Perth by the overnight train and delivered to our customers the same day. We did learn to like Vegemite, but we never gave up our *appelstroop*. And to this day, a deep-rooted addiction to *zoute drop* – strongly salted licorice candies – still distinguishes descendants of Dutch immigrants from the general population.

In 1961, when I was ten, my father passed away. My mother was left, as a 36-year-old widow, to bring up a houseful of children as well as manage a fully-fledged business. She did both with remarkable success. This was also the time when the first self-service supermarkets began to make their appearance. That was a huge challenge: neighbourhood shops such as ours could never compete on price or product range. In addition, more and more families had cars, and were no longer dependent on deliveries from neighbourhood shops for their weekly supplies.

My mother carried on with Plug's General Store until 1965, at which time she sold the business as a going concern, migrated with eight children to Canada, and remarried. She lived a happy, productive and blessed life in a small town in northern British Columbia until her death in 2010.



Figure 2
Plug's General Store
Courtesy: Aart Plug.