



Gawler's Mike Johnson once operated Foodland, Tom's Gawler, and Gawler Cheap Foods, during the 1970s and 80s. A Foodland opened almost 50 years ago in the space now occupied by the Reject Shop. PHOTO: Ellouise Crawford

Many locals will remember when Mike and Cindy Johnson ran Gawler supermarkets in the 70s and 80s.



The opening week of Foodland Gawler, featured specials such as Coca-Cola cans for 12 cents each. PHOTOS: File

Remembering the grocery shop of yesteryear

ELLOUISE CRAWFORD

WHEN Mike and Cindy Johnson first opened their brand new Foodland on Murray St in 1973, it was the start of the family's two decade association with Gawler's supermarkets.

A can of soft drink was just 12 cents, a pound of T-bone steak 79 cents, and two litres of Golden North ice cream just 53 cents.

Barcodes weren't even a thing yet, angled parking was still in Murray St, and grocery shopping was often a social outing all on its own.

Speaking with *The Bunyip* recently, Mike said he remembers planning to service a population of just over 10,000, but then being

caught off guard by just how many customers he had.

"We only had three and a half checkouts and we didn't have room for any more," he said.

"In order to get people through the check out in busy periods we had the checkout person, as well as someone helping to unload and then another to bag and load back into the trolley.

"[For the checkout operators] we used to have speed checks and price checks on the specials every Monday morning – you had to have a quick pace and you had to have it right."

Today, plenty has changed in the local supermarket scene, but Mike and his daughters – who grew up among the happenings of their parents' businesses – still enjoy a good reminisce.

They are currently in the throes of planning a reunion for November, for all the staff who once worked across the Johnsons' stores.

The Johnsons had only been running Foodland for a short while when the opportunity came up to take over the 'Tom the Cheap' store, in Tod St.

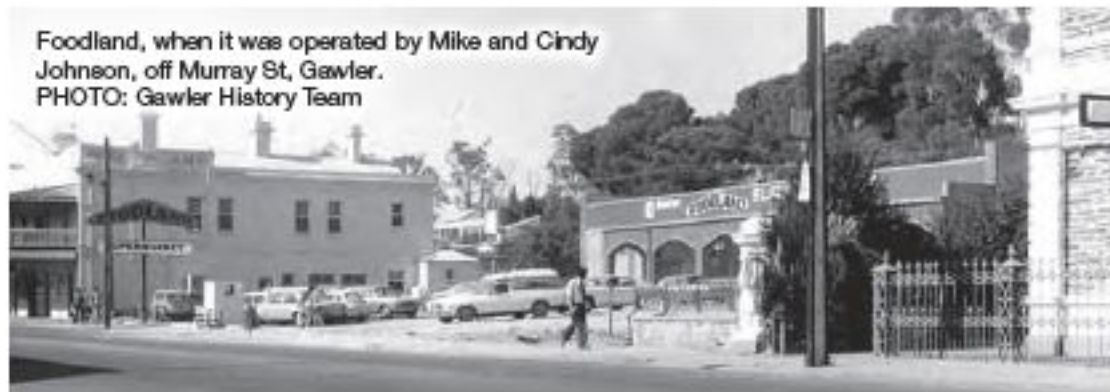
The store was rebranded as 'Tom's Gawler' and sold groceries in similar fashion to Foodland, albeit with much bigger retail and car parking spaces.

Computers were introduced at Tom's and then following a study tour to America, the Gawler Foodland became one of the first in the state to introduce a barcoding system.

Prior to that, the checkout operators had to manually type in the prices, remembering the weekly specials to make manual overrides at the checkout.

"Myself and another retailer from Salisbury way had been over to America for

Foodland, when it was operated by Mike and Cindy Johnson, off Murray St, Gawler.
PHOTO: Gawler History Team



a study tour and had seen the supermarkets over there doing scanning, and so the two of us together did a bulk buy," Mike said.

"The customer then had proof of what she was paying for, before that it was just a list of prices and you didn't even know which item it was.

"Accuracy was very important, particularly in the way we operated because our check out operators were expected to memorise the specials, and as with all things, people can make mistakes, and scanning took that out.

"We thought the scanning was mainly a customer relations exercise."

Daughter Michelle remembers helping out the back of Foodland as a kid, before she became officially employed and worked across all sections.

"I knew all the people that came in, and I'd take time to talk to people – Dad would encourage that," she said.

"Some staff stayed with Dad for almost the whole time, and then their daughters joined so it was across generations."

Foodland also offered a car service, where staff would accompany customers back to their car (no matter how far away) and would

unload the groceries into the boot for them.

Eventually, the Johnsons created their own discount group of stores called 'Cheap Foods', moving the Gawler Cheap Foods in where Foodland had operated on Murray St.

Foodland shifted into the bigger premises (where Tom's Gawler had been) on Tod St for a while until the Johnsons amalgamated their businesses and reopened Gawler Cheap Foods in a brand new store where Drakes Gawler now operates.

Cindy passed away from cancer in 1991 and shortly after, Mike, having lost some of the passion for supermarkets he had once shared with his wife, sold-up in '92.

Mike said he looked back on his supermarket days as happy ones, where everyone knew everyone and staff were like one big family.

The reunion of staff is currently being planned for lunchtime, November 19 in Gawler, 50 years on from the 1973 opening of Foodland.

Organisers are currently trying to ascertain numbers, with anyone interested in attending encouraged to contact Michelle on 0403 477 526.

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