

Trucking - A Ditches to Riches Story



TruckSure
By Trevor Toohill

I first became interested in trucking and transportation whilst working for Marsh as a broker in their Sydney office back in the early '70's.

It soon got under my skin and within a couple of years I was trying to insure anything that had a couple of wheels and moved something!

Some 40 odd years later I am still active with my clients and just as enthusiastic for the job as I was back in those earlier days. Reminiscing, as I find myself doing from time to time, got me thinking about some of the many thousands of clients and businesses that I have insured over this time.

You have to say that the trucking industry breeds characters and there is no shortage of stories to relate and yarns to spin. I got to thinking about who it was that I could say was my most interesting customer. While I give full respect to my existing clients I have to say without hesitation one name springs to mind from my past and I would like to relate his very impressive story.

A story that has motivated me personally on more than one occasion and I am sure you will also think that a Ditches to Riches yarn like this one is almost too good to be true. I can assure you that the story of **Sir Tristan Venus Antico** is true and depicts a real outstanding character of gigantic proportions. He died aged 81, having arrived at Sydney's overseas shipping terminal in 1930 with just three words of English - "yes", "no", "toilet".

From such humble beginnings, he became a Companion of the Order of Australia, three times knighted and one of Australia's most dynamic entrepreneurs. Born in a small village just north of Venice in 1923, Tristan was only a young boy when his family immigrated to Australia. His father valued education and saw this as a key to achievement. Tristan was clever and moved through his education easily.

On leaving school he joined a small manufacturer as a clerk and studied accountancy at night. He qualified and was promoted to assistant company secretary. After seven years he was wooed by the marble contractor Melocco Brothers, and here he learnt the basics of the concrete, marble and terrazzo industry.

Then in 1950, with a partner, Tristan borrowed £500 from his Uncle Beppi, bought a 1927 Oldsmobile, two picks, two wheelbarrows, two shovels and two brooms and drove about offering their services to Sydney building sites. Their first job was to lay foundations of a house. They made a profit of £42. Within 12 months they were employing a dozen staff in a business turning over £40,000.

In 1954 Tristan bought the Pioneer Readymix Company that had begun four years earlier. He was to run it for 43 years. Pioneer rode the building boom, and as its quarries and plants sprang up and its trucks poured concrete into building sites around the country and overseas, his enthusiasm was boundless. Pioneer became a public company in 1959 and was, at its height, Australia's third-largest building products corporation and the 19th-largest company on the Australian Stock Exchange. It evolved into a sprawling multinational, with

600 concrete plants and 120 quarries in 16 countries. During the '70's when I first met and had Tristan as a client he was acknowledged as one of Australia's leading businessmen.

In 1967 Italy recognised its lost son and made him a Commander of the Order of the Star of Solidarity, the first Australian to be so honoured. Australia recognised him as a migrant success story and knighted him in 1973 and in 1983 he became a Companion of the Order of Australia. A devout Catholic, he was honoured by the church with the Papal Order of St Gregory the Great and the ancient Order of Malta.

In 1980 Pioneer gained control of Ampol and Sir Tristan became its chairman. The '80's were a heady time for titans. A charismatic personality and a man of great stature he was larger than life. Arriving at his office in the building next to where I worked in Macquarie Street, we would see him emerge from his chauffeur driven Rolls-Royce, meticulously dressed in his pin-stripe suits and cigar in hand.

He was a connoisseur of everything and loved the sea, acquiring Shiloh, a 75-foot corporate cruising yacht, on which he entertained with style. Pioneer sponsored the first opera at the opening of the Sydney Opera House in 1973. There was something of the modern day Medici prince about him but he kept his head while others lost theirs.

In 1967 the sport of horse racing got into his blood. It was to bring him much joy - and probably as much grief. Horse prices rose throughout the '80's. Sir Tristan created an iconic corporate brand, Bernborough Breeding and Racing Ltd, and it topped sales at the Sydney yearling sales during that time. However, in 1990 horse prices dropped by 50 per cent and fell further in 1991.

Sir Tristan seemed to be embroiled in litigation for most of the '90's and, although he emerged creditably from most of these, costs proved prohibitive. His personal losses were substantial. Although he had lost considerable wealth, his dignity did not desert him. He accepted his reversals with grace. He had reason to be proud of his record at Pioneer and Ampol.

When the business that he had built in 1950 with a few wheelbarrows and shovels and the Oldsmobile changed hands half a century later, it did so for \$4 billion.

As far as I am concerned, Sir Tristan Venus Antico's legacy remains a remarkable one. 🚚



This is a file photograph used to improve the look of the page.



MultiSure

0800 287 287

www.trucksure.co.nz



TruckSure

'We've got trucking covered'