

Forget the pinstripe - Bendigo Bank's got character

For an organisation that for a long time was renowned for being run by dour, 'grey' Methodists, Bendigo Bank has had its fair share of colourful characters, including a few skeletons in the closet, writes General Manager Marketing & Corporate Affairs Owen Davies

We've had brewers and wowers; drovers and seafarers; gold tycoons and thespians.

And that's just board members. Some of the staff have been truly colourful.

And like any institution that has survived for a century-and-a-half, some have assumed a larger-than-life presence in the corporate memory.

Frank Perrow – 'Mr Building Society' as The Bendigo Advertiser headlined him – bestrides the company history like a colossus, his 57 years of service qualifying him for legend status.

Taken on staff at the age of just 14 in 1928, Perrow was the Society's seventh employee under long-term manager Andrew Balsillie.

Balsillie was to be a powerful influence on the young Perrow, most famously for his treatment of borrowers who fell on hard times during the Great Depression. Rather than turf them out into the street, Balsillie had Perrow deliver them a hand-signed letter imploring them to "stay in the house for six months or so, when things might get better". This display of empathy was to breed generations of loyalty for the Society.

From tending Balsillie's horse as a 14-year-old, Perrow



graduated through the ranks to manager by 1947, a post he was to hold for 31 years.

Balsillie's lessons had well and truly sunk in, and many a Bendigo family owes its good fortune to two of Perrow's defining characteristics – his compassion and his ability to judge a sound risk. It is widely held, though of course not documented, that Perrow more than once dipped into his own pocket to lend money to borrowers unable to be accommodated under Society rules.

But the same man was also quick to temper ... and just as quick to return to even temperament. Veteran lender Peter Opie recalls the day Perrow flew out of his office in rage, ranting in the corridor outside Opie's office.

"Foolishly, I stuck my head out to see what was wrong just as

Mr Perrow aimed an almighty kick at the door jamb." He missed the woodwork but collected Opie's shin a ripper. Perrow stormed off.

Opie was tenderly rubbing his leg when his door opened to reveal a more subdued general manager. "Did I kick you in the leg, Opie?" he asked. Ah, here comes the apology, Opie thought. "As a matter of fact you did, Mr Perrow." "Thought I did," replied the great man – and turned on his heel and left.

Like Perrow and Balsillie, Opie is a '40-year man'. Such long service has been a hallmark of Bendigo employees. The modern record, at least, is held by one Douglas "Dougie" Laity, who clocked up a mere 48 years, most of them as the famed 'number one teller' when the Society was a one-office show in Bull Street.

Customers in Dougie's early years would fill the office on 'interest morning', waiting patiently for their passbooks to be updated by staff who loudly called out their surname to collect their book from the counter.

"Power", "Smith", "O'Brien". All was well when it was Anglo-Saxon, but Dougie struggled a little when confronted with the Germanic "Fuchs". Sweating profusely, he suddenly hit

on the solution. Drawing the woman customer's eye, he thrust out the book and crisply called: "Your book, madam!"

The bank these days is a sprawling behemoth compared with Dougie's heyday, but its encouragement of individualism is undiminished. "Bring your personality to work with you," is a favoured catchcry of current MD Rob Hunt.

... but perhaps leave your football boots home.



Frank Perrow

Our characters

