



*The Automotive  
Air-conditioning, Electrical  
and Cooling Technicians of  
Australasia*

**FRANK ALLISON**  
**4 May 1931 – 11 July 2011**

CEO Mobile Airconditioning Association (IMACA)  
VASA Legend

It's a long way from Texas to Australia, but Frank Allison's influence knew no boundaries. On the VASA website, in the history page where pioneers are honoured, this comment appears at the end of a glowing tribute to Frank 'If this were a religious revival, we could claim that VASA has a direct link with God'.

Frank is on this Australasian website because VASA had conferred its rare Legend status on him for having assisted in framing VASA's philosophies and attitudes at its birth.

Frank was then CEO of the International Mobile Airconditioning Association in Texas IMACA. He was already well known in Australia. In fact, he is credited with helping to kick start the country's mobile air conditioning industry.

In 2000, when VASA gave Frank his Legend award, his half a century in the game was acknowledged. 'Frank knows at first hand about every air conditioning issue, every product, every service ethic and every threat and opportunity', said VASA's founding president Mark Mitchell.

Mark has maintained a strong relationship with Frank and his wife Josephine and family, and at their last meeting at Frank's home in June this year, Frank was happy to share the highlights of his business life with Mark. More than that, Frank pulled out an immaculately kept folder containing a text and slide presentation which just happens to document the history of air conditioning in the US. He presented it to Mark, who promised to share it with the world.

Frank Allison knew a lot about mobile air conditioning and refrigeration, but he was never on the tools. His career began on the counter of a men's clothing store in Little Rock, Arkansas.

He excelled as a salesman and apparently became skilled in business management, negotiations and problem solving.

His strength throughout his career was his ability not to jump to conclusions. Mark Mitchell noted that 'Frank was good under pressure. While everyone else was dancing up and down about the problems the air conditioning industry would face

with the phase out of CFCs, Frank and his team quietly stood back, analysed it rationally and as a result, the retrofitting was nowhere near the big bogey which might have been portrayed by those who would have profited from uninformed chaos'.

Climatic Air, with its brands, Equip Air and Parkomatt, was started by Jack Durrett in 1950 in Dallas, Texas. Parkomatt was originally a parking meter manufacturer but then moved into air conditioning systems for cars.

At that time, Frank was working as a salesman for Philco Auto Radios. In 1958 he joined Climatic, selling air conditioning systems and radio installation kits as a package to car dealers. He wrote good business because the radios he offered had AM and FM stereo, whereas most car manufacturers offered only AM radio. The air conditioning systems were under dash and boot models.

Frank opened Climatic Air's office in Los Angeles in 1962.

A year later, a diminutive and savvy Japanese industrialist, Tetsuo Nobata walked into Frank's office and revealed his grand plan to air condition the Tokyo taxi fleet. Nobata knew little about car air conditioning, but he had the contract in his bag from the owner of the largest taxi fleet on the planet.

From that meeting, a life long friendship began between Mr Nobata and Frank. Their meeting was probably the beginning of the air conditioning aftermarket industry in Japan, which led to the development of Unicla, the biggest independent air conditioning compressor and component designer and manufacturing enterprise in Japan and one of the most famous brands in the aftermarket.

Unicla moved to China following Mr Nobata's death in 2005, with several of his trusted pioneer engineers still guiding design. Mark Mitchell is now a part owner of the company and directs its global marketing and technical research. Mr Nobata's portrait hangs in Unicla's Hong Kong headquarters.

Whenever he was asked about the success of his massive enterprise, Mr Nobata never hesitated, 'Mr Allison was my teacher.'

Mr Nobata's orders through Frank Allison were massive by the standards of the day. One order alone was for 30,000 complete air conditioning mobile systems. The level of shipments going through the port of Los Angeles was such that the city's Mayor telegraphed Mr Nobata to thank him for using the port. The framed telegram hung on Mr Nobata's boardroom wall for 40 years.

In the mid 1960s, Frank boarded a propeller aeroplane for the three leg flight to Australia. He arrived in Sydney and cold called likely candidates for his products from the phone book. Historic meetings and supply arrangements were made with Sydneysider Bernie Oros, and Melbourne businessman Bruce Humphries, which were the most significant sparks to ignite the mobile air conditioning industry in

Australasia. Frank's sales trip was an exhausting six week long string of flights, hotels and meetings.

Another Australian pioneer of vehicle air conditioning, Ralph Cadman, who started his business around 1967, started sourcing information and product in America and it would be inevitable that he became a regular visitor to Frank's business and home. Mr Nobata had met Ralph a lot earlier and between the three of them, not only was a life-long relationship set in concrete, but Ralph then became Mr Nobata's right hand man for most of Unicla's product development years, eventually handing over this role to Mark Mitchell.

When Frank left Climatic, it was to pursue car radio opportunities which were significant at the time.

He joined car radio importer Astro Sonics, run by Bob Maniaci in Los Angeles in 1974.

Frank was its vice president of sales and marketing. He summed up his time there in his trademark understated fashion, 'We sold a lot of radios'.

Two years later, Frank was hired by NGK Georgia, run by Jack Phillips, to take the spark plug distribution business into radios.

Another two years and Frank was appointed president of Frigette, owned by Cullen and Ken Davis, a family whose name became famous because of Cullen's widely publicised murder trial.

An intermediary who Frank had met from his days with Jack Durett had recommended Frank for the job and set up his first interview with Cullen, in the Amorillo jail where he was awaiting trial for murder.

Frank recalled that Cullen was less worried about being in jail than what was going wrong back at Frigette and he wanted it fixed. The Davis family also owned Stratoflex, the inventor of modern flexible air conditioning hose.

Frank managed to turn the company around in three or four years, but had to move heaven and earth to do it. Frigette, he said, was full of incompetencies which Frank shut down or repaired.

Frigette owned its own suppliers, so Frank had to dismantle what he called the 'rat's nests' of inflated prices and self interest.

He told Mark Mitchell 'I had never seen so much thievery in my life and it wasn't even the government'. It was a big operation, with 100 staff on the main assembly line and ten warehouses around the country.

As if he didn't have enough to do, Frank cultivated business for Frigette in Central and South America, where he would take his wife Josephine as Spanish translator.

Frank Allison's reputation as a businessman and fixer reached the ears of IMACA. They saw Frank as a father figure, and hired him as its executive director in 1987. He was considered to have a well rounded knowledge of the industry, and that was something IMACA needed in the heady years of the 80s through to the mid 90s, what with licensing, change of refrigerants, retrofitting issues and more.

It was in the late 80s when Mark Mitchell rapped on IMACA's door to learn about the structure of an industry association and how to avoid the mistakes which others had made. Mark found the industry varied little between Texas and Australia. He went back and helped found VASA and he was its president for a decade, and was only the second person to be awarded Legend status, alongside his mentor Frank Allison.

'Frank was a guy with a lot to say, he didn't suffer fools all that gladly, but he was very modest about himself and his achievements,' Mark says.

'Every now and then, an organisation needs to recognise that its success and its philosophies are influenced by a great mind. Frank Allison has been VASA's shadow since the early 1990s and his advice will be sorely missed.'