

More than just mail, meet the people saving their town's beloved outback post offices

ABC Western Qld / By Victoria Pengilley

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Ashlee Gray says the way mail moves across the country is fascinating. (ABC Western Qld: Victoria Pengilley)

At 27, Ashlee Gray never thought she'd be running a post office, let alone one in her hometown of Thargomindah in Queensland's outback.

But when the store appeared to be on the brink of closure last year after sitting on the market for several months, Ms Gray and her family stepped in.

"I certainly didn't see myself being the manager of a post office at 27, but the post office is an integral part of a community," she said.

The post office is one of a handful of businesses in the remote south-west Queensland town, situated about 1,000 kilometres west of Brisbane.

There's also a pub and roadhouse that services the 243 locals, but the town has been without a grocery store [since it burnt down in 2022](#).



The primary school has 19 students while the high school is [non-operational due to a lack of enrolments](#).

For Ms Gray, "Thargo" — as it's affectionately known by locals — is home.

"If we hadn't been successful with the purchase, they would have had to close the doors and I'm not sure what would have happened," she said.

"It's a family affair ... there's my parents, myself and my partner ... and the community. We all stick together quite well."



More than just post

Remote post offices provide more than just postal services to the community. They're also a retail space, a bank, somewhere to pay bills and a place for locals to chat and connect.

"We are the hub of the town," Tambo post office owner Michael Ellison said.

Mr Ellison and his husband Randall recently purchased the 119-year-old Tambo post office, about 600 kilometres north of Thargomindah in central-west Queensland. A town with a population of 367.



"We have some people in town who don't go out that often and actually look forward to coming to the post office to have that connection," Mr Ellison said.

"The post office is also for people's mental health.

"We're the friendly face customers see, so not having that service could be difficult for the community."

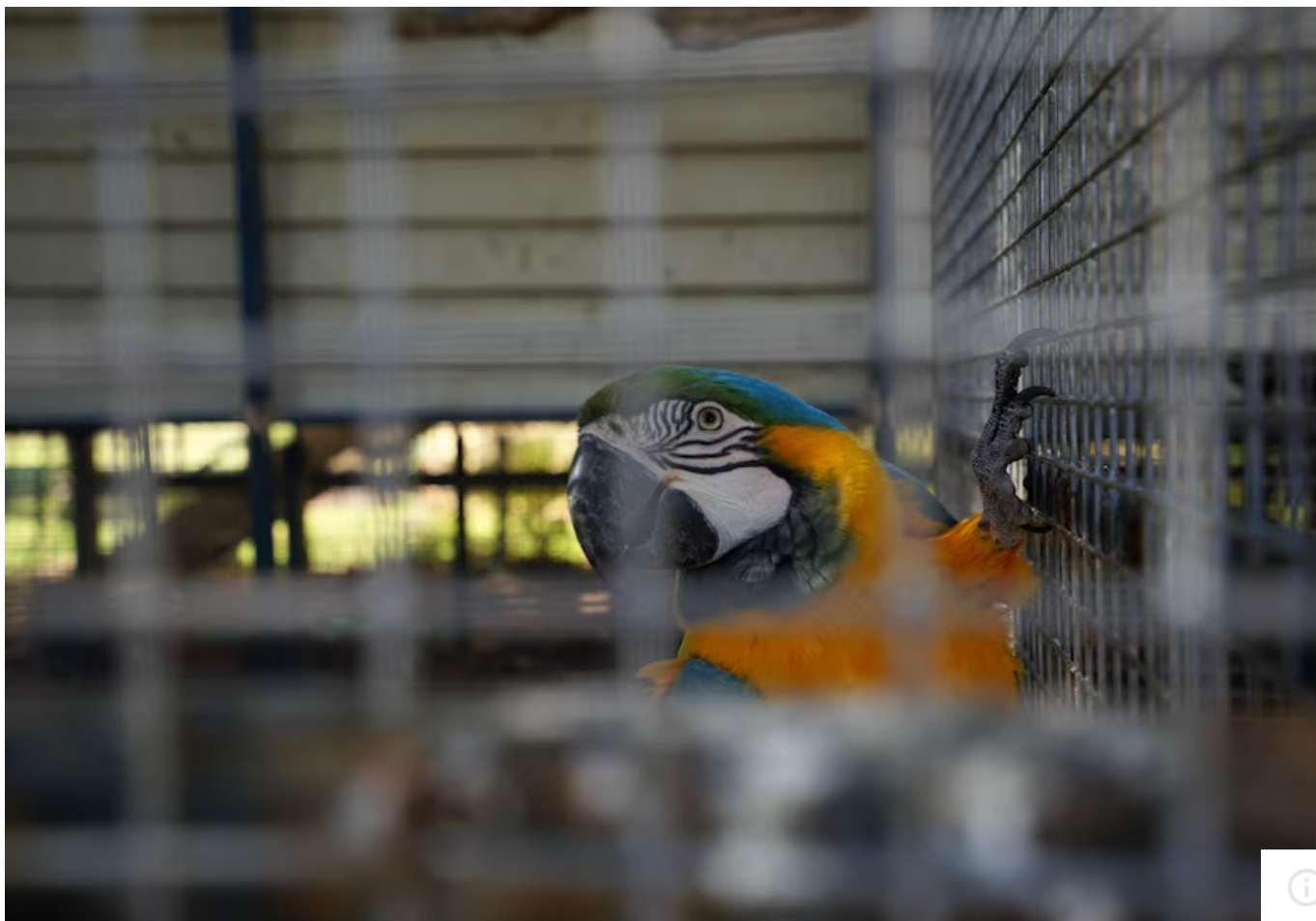
As well as the post office, the couple owns the local grocery store across the road. They are also slowly renovating the quaint postmaster's cottage, adding a cafe and a retail space, and bringing its colourful country garden back to life.



They have a pet macaw, Frankie, and a sulphur crested cockatoo, Maggie, on display for locals to meet, as well as an estimated 70 other pet animals, many of them fish.

Mr Ellison, who hadn't envisaged running a post office, said Australia Post contacted him about installing postal services at the grocery store ahead of the previous owners' retirement.

While that was not viable due to a lack of space, the couple could not bear to see the historical store close.



"There was this beautiful big building [built in 1904] that would be empty, so we just wanted to keep that service open for the town," Mr Ellison said.

"It affects everyone in the community."

Integral to the town

Back at Thargomindah, Ms Gray — who sorted mail for the previous owner — has a new appreciation for the complexities of the national mail system.

"There is a lot more involved with Australia Post than meets the eye," she said.

"It's kind of amazing how the mail moves around our country and internationally."



Thargomindah's post office is one of four remaining buildings in the town built with mud brick, considered the "best quality bricks that can be found" when it was reconstructed following a storm in 1877, according to the Bulloo Shire Council.

The post office services a vast area of the region, with posties deployed to deliver mail to outlying stations as far as the NSW border.

And it's had its fair share of excitement. In 1952 the post office burnt down after the postmaster dropped a cigarette butt among the mail bags while he was sorting the mail.

His young assistant had to open for business under a lone palm tree until arrangements to work elsewhere were made.



Australia Post told the ABC that posting facilities would have continued in some capacity if Thargomindah's post office was forced to shut.

But Ms Gray said customers would have had to travel more than two hours to Quilpie or Eulo to access certain postal services.

"It would have been a great struggle for the community had the post office completely shut down," she said.

"It would have been even more of a struggle to get the facility back. Once it closes in a small town like this, it's really hard to get the service back."



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