

THE STORE'S STORY

-- PART 5

Ha! You thought I'd give up, didn't you? Nope! You just won't be able to function properly without knowing what Gommel did to begin the transformation of Leo's Market into Lucerne Valley Market. (The "& Hardware" came much later.) So I'll fill you in and you'll feel so much better!

The original store that we bought had the two checkstands right at the front doors, as mentioned in part 4, along with the scale bridge that did double duty as a baby decapitator. So, needless to say, one of the very first improvements had to be to remove those checkstands and replace them with something much safer and more efficient. But there wasn't enough room!

So we made room! At first we rearranged just the front of the store, but ultimately we ended up doing the entire front half. All of the grocery shelves in the front (south) half of the store were crosswise (east-west), and the shelves in the back half were length wise (north-south). That blocked vision through the store to the back, making the whole thing a great hideout. You couldn't see anything from the front of the store to the back. That made it necessary to turn the east-west shelves 90° to be north-south, literally picking them up off the floor and rotating the shelf units by hand!

Operating on the principle that Pappy (my Grandpa Gommel) taught – "the difficult takes a while, and the impossible takes a little longer" – Gommel assembled a crew of staffers and outsiders, and in an overnight operation, used Johnson bar levers, jacks, and anything else with wheels to rotate the shelf units the necessary 90°, lining them up with the shelves in the back, and voila!

We could see down the aisles all the way to the back. I asked Bill Lembright if he was up here helping with that job, hoping he could fill in more details of the operation. Yes, he was up here helping, and I was there helping, but neither of us can remember how we did it. We must have blocked it out for the stress it caused!

Now we had a front office platform, not unlike the present one in the present store; three checkstands that didn't decapitate babies; and shelf units that were turned so we could see to the back of the store. The last two major changes were to move the produce case from the randomly arranged cases in the front of the store to a beautiful produce case that ran across the back (north) wall, brightly lit and attractive. Then we bought a used freezer truck trailer, backed it up to the north wall, and installed it as a permanent storage freezer, to replace a tiny freezer walk-in box that they had been using all along.

We planted bushes around the building to soften the harsh concrete block exterior. The existing staffers stayed on and we hired a few more. We faced down the nasty teenagers who had taken over the parking lot and won the battle to make them leave. And then the fun began.

Sales started growing fairly quickly and quite substantially, making the store more and more crowded, both with people and with products. The parking lot was full of cars more and more often. As a result, Gommel developed plans to add on to the building, hoping that the landlords would agree and

old heave-ho. He continued to operate the store and renamed it Center Market, while we kept our name Lucerne Valley Market and our shopping carts with that name embossed on the handles.

We were never quite sure why the landlord was so reluctant for us to expand the building and to remain a part of the enterprise, except that the hand of God was in it. Apparently He wanted us to build a new store. It was one of those exciting times when God's involvement and direction was so clear as to be beyond any doubt. One day we were in the store running it. The next day we were out on the street, so to speak. But economic conditions did not lend to any kind of optimism to take out a large loan on a big project.

The year was 1982. The economy had not yet recovered from the stagnation of the 70's. Interest rates were high, around 20%. The landlord was betting that we would be unable to do anything about building a new store. Unsure whether or not we would be able to pull it off, Gommel proceeded to buy a 13-acre parcel from Vern Huck at the intersection of Hwy. 18 and 247 (Barstow Road). Then he went to work designing the new store. (Remember, he was a licensed civil engineer with a background in construction with Pappy.)

He wanted to build for future growth but didn't want to be utterly stupid, so he designed the store to be half the size he really envisioned and placed the building on the lot far enough from the street so that there was room to double the size when the time came. He set up an office at home with all of his drawing tools, then hired a secretary (Marina Van den Broeke, the best example of pleasant persistence in pushing for what we needed that I've ever seen.) He worked with professionals in design and construction of a commercial

building like this one and managed to work through San Bernardino County and Cal Trans, cutting through the dreaded bureaucratic red tape, obtaining permits, and dancing to their tune just enough to get the job done.

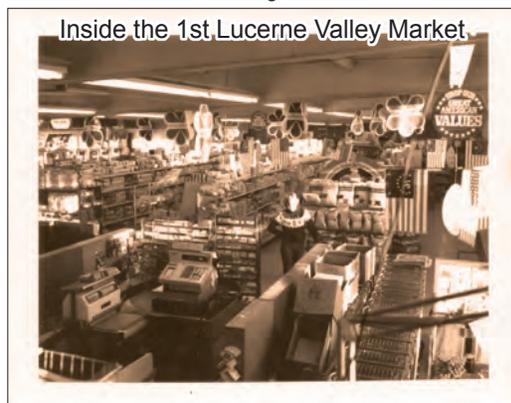
During that time, Bill Lembright and I worked at the brand new Safeway store just built in Hesperia, at the corner of "I" and Main Streets. Once we knew that we would no longer be in our own store, we saw that Safeway was interviewing for their new store, so we both went, took their tests, and did their interviews. I was hired as a checker, later to become an overnight stocker when they saw that they couldn't keep me in the checkstands while the store needed stocking and facing. Ultimately I was given the job of scanning maintenance, when scanning of groceries was in its infancy. What a helpful learning experience! It was another sign of the hand of God in all of this.

Bill was hired as an overnight stocker, and he learned to run the registers, and also to work produce. His experience was most helpful also. Interestingly, we ended our jobs at the old Lucerne Valley Market on Saturday, Jan. 9, and began our new jobs at Safeway on Monday, Jan. 11. It became a wonderful time of learning and simply enjoying the fun of the grocery business since someone else bore the ultimate responsibility. Thus another sign of the hand of God.

After eleven months of preparation and planning, including Bill and I doing double duty as Safeway clerks and layout specialists for the new Lucerne Valley Market, we were ready to break ground and get going. We had a little ground-breaking ceremony, to which the public was invited. It was November twenty something, 1982, on Thanksgiving weekend. The weather was cold, overcast, and windy. Quite a few people braved the cold to attend the ceremony, including one locally well-known character who arrived in dramatic fashion.

Who could that have been? Stay tuned for #6!

Linda Gommel



offering to them the opportunity to participate, since they had nothing to lose and much to gain in revenue from the growing sales.

However, the landlord had other ideas, and two years after the first five year lease expired, in 1981 the landlord decided to take back the store and to give us the