

THE STORE'S STORY

-- PART 6

When last we met, we were discussing the momentous occasion of building this store from ground up. Bill Lembright and I had to quit our jobs at Safeway in Hesperia in order to focus all of our time and effort on getting the new store going.

To paraphrase Snoopy, that well-known expert on everything, "It was a dark and stormy day," in November, the weekend of Thanksgiving. The wind was blowing. It was COLD. But a few hardy souls showed up for our groundbreaking ceremony, complete with a gold-plated shovel (ok, it was just painted gold). We were all standing around waiting, but for what?

Within a few minutes, a helicopter came overhead and landed, and out stepped Sheriff Floyd Tidwell. We had become fairly well acquainted with him in Reche Canyon while at the Hitchin Post, since he lived there and would come into the store from time to time.

(I cannot resist this opportunity to insert a short story about that. Sheriff Tidwell was a tough cop type, and even when in the humble little Hitchin

Post, he instinctively responded in tough mode to the types that made his spider sense tingle. I was in awe of him and could barely make an intelligible sentence in his presence. He knew it and so one day, when I was waiting on him, he hopped up onto my side

of the counter and sat on it, swinging his legs. All the while he had in impish grin on his face, knowing I had just turned to a bowlful of jelly. At least he had a good laugh.)

Sheriff Tidwell's mother also lived in Reche Canyon, in the mobile home park by the store, so she also was a good friend of ours. We would bring her out here to visit, and one time, we took her out to where she and her husband and Floyd had lived and had



Sheriff Tidwell & Gommel at ground breaking



Concrete step: "STEP High Wide and Handsom"

a cattle ranch, on the north side. She took us down a dirt road to a concrete foundation that had been their house, and we found a concrete step with the inscription "Step high, wide, and handsome" written in it. We brought that step home, and when Sheriff Tidwell came out here for the ground breaking, he installed it as a kind of cornerstone for the project.

The winter of 1982-83 was one of the wettest and coldest in years,

creating a set of challenges for the project. We raced to get the roof done before the rains came, and finished it the day before it began to rain in earnest for a good share of the remaining weeks of winter. Another construction project nearby was not so lucky and were delayed for a few weeks until the rain stopped.

As concrete was poured for the floors, we had to use heaters to try to keep it warm enough to cure properly. The concrete floors were always a sore spot for Gommel, since they did suffer from the cold. As you walk down aisle one, you can still see how uneven the floor is in that area.

When we got to the point of needing to assemble the shelving for the groceries and the hardware, we had to do it in the cold and dark building, because SCE couldn't connect the power until the County made a final inspection. We used flashlights and space heaters as we worked.

My job involved setting up vendors and salesmen to come set the grocery shelves, and then to place the opening orders for the entire grocery section. As I look back on it now, I cannot imagine how I did that! The grocery industry was quite different then, much more open and relationship-based. We had made warm friendships with the sales reps while at the old store, so when we needed them for this project, they came willingly.

Barb Gommel was at her best as hostess for these people. She made sandwiches and sometimes hot food to feed these fairly large crews of 20 or 30 people. They were in awe of the warm reception they received, compared to the chain stores that take their help for granted and give them little or no personal consideration. There they had to follow a map, called a schematic, showing the layout of the products, and they were not

allowed to deviate from that map. At our store, because we had no such map, they could use their judgment and creativity, working together with their competitors to make the sections look good. The Hills Brothers guy worked with the Folgers guy; the Kellogg's guy worked with the Post guy. It was amazing, good spirited, and actually, aside from the stress of arranging it, lots of fun.

Somewhere in all of that, we had to arrange to get gum and candy racks



Raising the walls



Framed front of store

for the checkstand area; arrange products in the dairy box, the deli cases, and the freezers; lay out the Health and Beauty Care section; assign prices for every single item, and print shelf tags for all of that. In retrospect, I don't know how we did it, but somehow we did.

Setting the hardware aisles was a different story. Because of the complexity of the hardware merchandise, and the specialized shelving

needed for some of it, we had to hire a professional outfit to do the job. We were put in touch with a husband and wife team who did this kind of thing, and their task was to assemble all of the shelving and lay out all of the merchandise. They drove us nuts! They were slow and didn't seem to catch the vision of how much merchandise we had to cram in the space allotted.

Bill Lembright remembers that we had hoped to lay out that part of the store at a lower height so you could see over the shelving, like many hardware and auto parts stores. That idea lasted a millisecond, as we soon realized that the merchandise we had ordered for minimally good selections of hardware would never fit on those low gondolas, so we did an emergency order of extenders to raise the gondolas two feet, adding quite a bit of space to the sections. Still, fitting all of the merchandise into the expanded, very, very TALL sections was a cram job of cram jobs. And our slow-paced turtle couple continued their slo-o-o-o-w pace!

Our first hardware "partner" (sounds warm and fuzzy, doesn't it?) was True Value Hardware, who had a good name and also a variety division, called V&S Variety, which was to help round out the product offerings between hardware and grocer-

ies. Several years later we turned to Ace Hardware, and now for 15 years we have been with Do it Best Hardware. And as you can see, the hardware aisles are still TALL, like canyons, and still crammed with merchandise. In fact they are so crammed that sometime during those years, Gommel (my dad) designed sliders to roll back and forth in front of the hardware sections, adding large flat areas for peg hooks and more merchandise to challenge you.

We still had to get checkstands and cash registers for the front checkout area, which on our budget was used, as were all of the freezers and coolers. The scanning of groceries was just beginning, but we weren't ready to do that yet, so we bought used registers that would be able to scan when support would be available from our wholesaler Certified Grocers (later Unified Western Grocers, then Unified Grocers, then Supervalu, and finally now UNFI, or United Natural Foods International, I think!).



New shelving and merchandise ready to go!

All of this had to come together like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle and put into place between that ground-breaking ceremony in late November, 1982 and the opening day of March 26, 1983. In that short four months, we built this building from the ground up, brought in all of the equipment necessary, ordered merchandise, laid out the shelves, and oh, yes, I almost forgot! We had to hire people to work here! Duhhh. We had to find meat cutters, grocery stockers, checkers and baggers, and hardware clerks, all to be at least somewhat trained and ready to go on opening day.

Somehow, we did it. Looking back on it now, almost 40 years later (Wow!), I cannot imagine how we did all of that. It seems like a miracle, and maybe it was, because God's hand was in it, and because this truly and legally is HIS store. He has a stake in its fulfillment of its mission to serve this community, and so He led us and strengthened us to enable us to carry it out.

Sales weren't too rosy at first, and our chins dragged on the ground. What happened to all our visions immediate acceptance and great sales? We'll cover that in our next installment, #7, yet to come. Aren't you lucky??

Linda Gommel