

THE STORE'S STORY

-- PART 8

Whoa! Sales just were not adding up! How are we going to pay the bills????

It was March of 1983 and we had just opened up Lucerne Valley Market in its brand new building. We had forecast sales that would be higher than the sales in the old store, proportionate to the larger size of the store, the larger selection, and because all of our former loyal customers would come rushing back to support the store.

It didn't work out that way. People tend to be creatures of habit, and they had had a full year, 14 months actually, to form new habits, find new products they were happy with, and create new relationships with the staffers in whatever store they were patronizing.

We were too exhausted to do a fancy grand opening and so just opened without much fanfare. We had to focus on helping new staff to learn routines that we hadn't even learned yet ourselves. All of us who did office work, including Gommel, shared the front office you still see today, up the steps, between the two front doors. The Service Counter was located where Sir William (Lembright, intrepid explorer of Tootle fame) has now hogged the space for his wood-burning stoves and swamp coolers.

For the first time we had a real hardware section, True Value Hardware!

Selling hardware was a whole new experience for us, requiring more learning unfamiliar stuff. (I never did learn hardware. It's like speaking Russian or something. I never needed to. I'm just an office Blob, not a doer of neat stuff.) We had to learn to mix paint. We had to learn what we didn't have that customers needed. It was a totally new experience but very important to the store's survival, since it contributed a much better profit margin than groceries do and so helped pay the bills.

Of course, Gommel was very conversant in Hardware-speak, having grown up in construction and carpentry with his dad, Ernie Gommel Sr. (Oh, no! You mean there were TWO Ernie Gommels?? Yes, but sadly, to the detriment of this world, both have passed on to be with our Father, we believe.) So he had strong opinions about the items we would carry. Ask Sir William about how

easy that was to deal with!

And then we had all this room for groceries, meat, deli items, dairy items, and produce, compared to what we had had before! And then, as we started to fill the shelves, it became, "Oh, no, where do we put all this stuff??" As I look back on it, I have no idea how we knew what to order for the grocery sections, how many items to put there, how to arrange them all.

After the agonizing summer of 1983, when we didn't know whether we would survive as a business or not, we joined the Better Independent Grocers (B.I.G.) ad group, relatively recently organized by our grocery wholesaler/partner, Certified Grocers. We met with other store owners weekly to look at ad items and decide together on pricing and placement in the ad. Then the ad group printed a color ad that would be distributed in each store's local area, usually inserted in a bundled advertising mailer. It was a big step for independents to have a color ad mailed to our customers.

Our first B.I.G. ad was the colorful Thanksgiving ad for 1983,



featuring a turkey as low as 19¢/lb., on a sliding scale up to 49¢/lb, depending on the total purchase of groceries a customer had. It was a big success and seemed to break loose our sales struggle, opening the door to re-forming customers' habits to shop at home instead of in town. We breathed a huge sigh of relief.

During that decade of the eighties, you'd think we would just operate our new store and breathe free for a while. But then, you'd be thinking wrong. Gommel had

IDEAS.

Ideas to fill voids in services to the community. He wanted to expand the shopping center and make space available for others to lease, but he didn't want to build a bunch of units only to have them sit empty. That would taint the shopping center with an image of dereliction. We would build slowly, as there was a legitimate tenant needing space.

The service we were asked most about was a coin laundry. There had been one in the building where the sheriff's office is now located. It consisted of just a few washers and dryers and shared that building with the Post Office and a gun shop. It was tiny, the machines were old, and the owner was tired of doing it. So he closed it. We decided that would be our next building, which was built in 1987.

We didn't know what to name it, so we held a contest to see what people could come up with. Guess which name won? Duh! How about Wash n Shop? What a surprise! Actually it's a neat little play on the coin laundry's association with the store next door, and so it stuck.

While we were at it, we built that building a little larger than needed for just the Wash n Shop, so that we would have one small storefront available for someone who might want it. Someone did. For a brief few months, a veterinarian rented out that small space, where Dr. Melvani's office is now. He would come a couple of days a week, but after a few months, he gave up due to the expense and the time for



Building the Wash n Shop

traveling out here. (It was probably my fault that he left. I brought him a feral cat who had adopted us at home, only to continue to pop out a bunch of kittens. Somehow we managed to catch her, but when the vet tried to get her out of the cage, well, you can imagine what happened. I don't think he ever forgave me for that!)

The next occupant, who was there under a couple of different owners for over 20 years, was a hair salon, called Shear Perfection. Again, a needed service added to a couple of others already open in town. They were a great tenant and appreciated by the people.

The last and current occupant of that space is Dr. Melvani, who moved there from a building down the highway a couple of miles, when Shear Perfection finally closed. Dr. Melvani has his main practice in Victorville, but he has offered office hours one morning and one afternoon each week for over 20 years. It is costly and inconvenient for him to do that, but he has a heart for Lucerne Valley and has sacrificed to do that for our community.

Gommel still was not through with building and improvements. In 1988 or 89 (my memory fails me), we built one more addition onto the Wash n Shop building, designed for as many as 3 tenants. It took a while to gain tenants for it, and guess who the first tenant of that new building was! Us! We needed one of the three units to serve as an office for our enterprise, so Gommel set one unit up with a glassed in office for him, a reception desk where we made keys, and a couple of other desks and a meeting area in the back.

You guessed it, or maybe you didn't, but Gommel was preparing for another (!) BIG construction project! What in the world could that be?

(To be continued.)

Linda Gommel



The New Wash n Shop

ON THE LIGHTER SIDE

Contributed. From the Web.

SQUIRRELS - A LITTLE LEVITY

The Presbyterian church called a meeting to decide what to do about their squirrel infestation. After much prayer and consideration, they concluded that the squirrels were predestined to be there, and they should not interfere with God's divine will.

At the Baptist church, the squirrels had taken an interest in the baptistry. The deacons met and decided to put a water-slide on the baptistry and let the squirrels drown themselves. The squirrels liked the slide and, unfortunately, knew instinctively how to swim, so twice as many squirrels showed up the following week.

The Lutheran church decided that they were not in a position to

harm any of God's creatures. So, they humanely trapped their squirrels and set them free near the Baptist church. Two weeks later, the squirrels were back when the Baptists took down the water-slide.

The Episcopalians tried a much more unique

path by setting out pans of whiskey around their church in an effort to kill the squirrels with alcohol poisoning. They sadly learned how much damage a band of drunk squirrels can do.

But the Catholic church came up with a more creative strategy! They baptized all the squirrels and made them members of the church. Now they only see them at Christmas and Easter.

The LDS Church bap-

tized them and sent them on a two year Mission.

Not much was heard from the Jewish synagogue. They took

the first squirrel and circumcised him. They haven't seen a squirrel since.

