

Jensen Family Born to the Grocery Business

Three generations of the Jensen family pose outside Jensen's Foods, located on the corner of Foley and Northdale boulevards for the past half-century. Photo by Sue Austreng

By Sue Austreng Staff Writer

George Jensen was born to be a grocer - literally.

Seventy-three years ago, George's mother gave new meaning to the term "fresh produce" when she gave birth to him in the family grocery store.

Twenty-two years later, after graduating from college, George thought he'd start his own business.

Grocery was in his blood, so in the fall of 1959, George and his wife Janice set up a grocery shop on the corner of Foley and Northdale boulevards in Coon Rapids.

And that's where Jensen's Foods still stands today, 50 years later.

"Guess you could say 'there's no turning back.' Had to be a grocer," George said, seated comfortably in Jensen's Foods' deli section for an interview marking the 50th anniversary of the grocery store.

Of course, there have been some changes over the past 50 years, some challenges and some setbacks, but nothing the Jensen's couldn't overcome.

It's the family ties that bind, pulling the imperiled through the rough spots and providing rescue when life takes a turn for the worse.

For the Jensen's those troubles reared their ugly heads when fire threatened to burn the building down back in 1966, when the economy took a dive time and again, when giant chain-store groceries opened around the corner.

"Yes, we've had some tough times, but we always stuck with it because we always loved it," George said, and then turned to his daughter, Jennifer, who (with her younger sister) began working at Jensen's as a youngster and now serves as owner/operator of the family store.

Jensen's Foods was sold to Jennifer and her husband Corbin Washburn back in 1991, and today, George and Janice, Jennifer and Corbin and their two sons, Tyler and Max, carry on the Jensen family legacy in the grocery business.

"Now we've got three generations working here," George said, gesturing toward his grandson, Tyler, busy stocking shelves and sweeping floors.

Three generations who've pulled together and made Jensen's Foods the historic landmark grocery that it is today.

Fire, recession, competition - all this and more could have closed Jensen's Foods for good, but those family lies, like a rope thrown to a drowning child, saved the grocery from going under.

Take the fire, for example.

Late on Thanksgiving night, 1966, when the Jensen family settled back after enjoying a turkey dinner with all the fixings, the phone rang.

"There's a fire!" the caller shouted into the phone. "You better get out here!"

And so George raced out to the scene of the fire: the Northdale Shopping Center anchored by what was then called Jensen's Super Valu.

"The fire wall stopped it, didn't it?" asked Jennifer, who was just five years old at the time.

"The fire wall and the bulldozer," George said. "They brought in a bulldozer and dozed a hole between the mall and the store, 'That's what saved us,'" he said.

That, and hard work and family ties that kept the grocery store afloat.

Sure, they had to close for about a month's time long enough to clean up the smoke damage and restore the building.

But once that work was complete, George and Janice opened the doors once again.

And sure enough, customers came back, eager to fill their grocery carts with fresh produce, meats and

canned goods and maybe a homemade bakery item or two.

Years later, the bakery still boasts the "best buns in town," Corbin said, and offers some of the best sweet treats in the area, he said.

In addition to fresh produce, fresh-cut meats, and fresh-baked bakery items, Jensen's Foods provides catering service for events big and small.

"We've done weddings, graduations. We've also done events for businesses in the area, Anoka-Ramsey, the banks, the chamber of commerce. We'll cater anything," Corbin said.

It seems the family ties truly do keep Jensen's going and those family ties extend to customers, too.

"There are so many people who came in here when we opened, and they still come in here now," said Janice.

"Very few groceries stay in the family for so long." George said. "And now we have so many people who come in who used to be little kids coming in with their parents. We've got second- and third-generation customers," he said.

Jennifer credits Jensen's Foods' competitive pricing and quality products for the loyalty of its customers.

"That, and when you know all your customers, coming here is like coming home. Everybody likes to come home," Corbin said.

George credits Jennifer and Corbin's family-oriented business style for Jensen's ongoing longevity.

"The way Jennifer and Corbin run the store brings people back," George said. "They present the store to the customer the way the customer wants it, so of course, they keep coming back."

And George keeps coming back, too.

Although he is no longer Jensen's Foods owner/ operator, he is a regular presence at the grocery store.

"People are always asking for George. They want to say, 'Hi,' and see what's going on," Jennifer said.

George also stays in touch with the farmers, selecting the freshest produce and visiting the farmers market throughout the season.

"I always like to get involved with the farmers, get the fresh vegetables, get to the market," George said.

As for Jensen's younger customers. Corbin credits his sons with drawing them into the store.

"Their personality, their smile - that's what brings in the younger generation," Corbin said, grinning at Tyler as he readied the pricing gun for action on the shelves.

As Jensen family ties wrap around the neighborhood. Jensen's Foods weaves deep lifelong friendships into the family tree, all the while producing happy customers with satisfied bellies.

So, stop in. Grab a sandwich from the deli and a slice of homemade pie from the bakery. Might as well stock up on bread and milk, eggs and hamburger while you're at it.

And be sure to say hello to the Jensen's - it's a sure bet at least one of the three generations will be in the house, eager to greet a new family member.