

Miller's Super Market, Inc.

... the friendly guys!

WHOLESALE & RETAIL

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West Sand Lake Historical Society Meeting

March 13, 1990

Miller's Supermarket family business; history to current

- 1) History of Ed Zeronda and Joe Quillinan, prior to and including W.S.L. days.
- 2) Review of business growth and expansion over the years since 1951
- 3) current days co - existing with the Super Giant Chain Store Operations.
- 4) Question / Answer period, not necessarily at the end of discussion.

Please interrupt at any time to offer your information or personal experiences.

The following has been taken from an audio tape made during the March 13, 1990 meeting of the Sand Lake Historical Society. Steve Quillinan of Miller's Market talked about "Small Family Business - through the Years 'til Today."

SMALL FAMILY BUSINESS - THROUGH THE YEARS 'TIL TODAY

The origin and development of Miller's Super Market as a family -operated business and how it meets the needs of its patrons today was the subject of a presentation by Steve Quillinan who, with his brother Joe, owns and operates the West Sand Lake market.

Steve opened with a story he heard at a Chicago convention of independent super market owners. The speaker at this event asked all managers of super markets to raise their hands. Then, all founders. Then, the sons of founders and operators. The last group was told that they are the fellows they hope won't "screw up." Steve and his brother, Joe, obviously operate their business with pride and expertise and can afford to laugh at this anecdote.

In tracing the history of Miller's, Steve interviewed his father. Joe, Sr., started Siena College but, when his father died in 1938, he sought employment at the Watervliet Arsenal. It was here that he learned to "make things." (A skill to be used later in building such things as shelves for the stores.) He served with the Marines in World War II and received a letter of commendation from President Franklin Roosevelt. After the war, he spent a short period selling real estate with his brother but left to join the sales force at Proctor and Gamble. It was on this job that

he met and was trained by Ed Zeronda. Between them, they covered all of Albany, Rensselaer, and Columbia Counties selling soap and shortening for Proctor and Gamble. This was the start of a friendship and business relationship which endured for 29 years.

At about this same time, Mike Miller was in the business of selling meat and poultry door-to-door from a wagon. He opened his first store in Snyder's Hotel. In 1951, this business was known as "Mike Miller's Sons." The following year, Joe Quillinan and Ed Zeronda bought the business from the Millers. One interesting note which will indicate the quality of their friendship is that Ed's mother loaned Joe the money to pay for his part of the purchase price. In 1956 a store measuring 60 by 100 feet was constructed. In the years that followed, some sort of expansion of the business occurred every 9 or 10 years. In 1965, a new entrance and enlarged parking facilities were added. In 1976, an addition of 32 by 110 feet was constructed. And, in 1987, the new store was completed. It measures 165 by 180 feet (almost 30,000 square feet in all.)

Miller's is operated as an independent super market with no ties to any chain or cooperative. In the United States, 54%

of all markets are independently owned; 46% are chain stores. The Northeast has the highest percentage of independent markets while New York State has the highest number of chain stores.

How can an independently owned family business compete with the chains? Personal service, cleanliness, guarantees, good pricing are among the factors which make it all work. As Steve put it, quoting his father, " You stand on your ear taking care of people."

In the 1950's, individual vendors were the source of supply for the independents. Involved in this sort of purchasing was the need for each store to pick up its own orders. Into this picture came the Sweet Life organization. It is also a family run operation and began by soliciting business to serve as the wholesaler for independently owned family stores. This business arrangement has enabled the individuals to enjoy the same buying power as the chains. Sweet Life has been wholesaling for 22 years offering values and services to 500 independent retailers in the Northeast. A market can wire its needs over a computer hook-up and have the items delivered right to the store on the same day. Sweet Life is also involved in related services.....dealing with equipment and advertising.

When the influx of new chain supermarkets in this area took place in 1988, Miller's was not hurt by the newcomers. The Quillinans found they were able to compete with the chains' prices.

In a question period after the talk, Steve agreed that wholesale prices can make or break an independent operator.

Some have gone out of business due to failure to reinvest their profits back into the firm.

What are the Quillinans' plans for the future? They would like to upgrade the exterior of the new building. They plan more planting in the parking lot area. As for expansion, they seem to feel they are fully developed at the present site. When they were planning to build the new structures, they knew they would allow room for Key Bank. Then, Rite Aid informed them that, if they didn't build a store for them, Rite Aid would build its own.at another site. The Quillinans have looked into branching out into other areas but nothing is in the works for the near future.

Scanners? Miller's has been holding back because other stores have experienced so many problems with the early models. However, their registers are equipped to handle scanners and they will eventually be installed. The present cost is \$10,000 each.

Miller's use of electricity costs \$7000 to \$10,000 monthly. Though the store doesn't have a back-up generator system, they do have alarms which phone into the homes of four people should there be any interruption in power or service when the store is closed. A back-up generator to carry their load would cost \$250,000.

Miller's has never laid off an employee because of a slump in sales. They have a number of people who have served in the business for over 30 years.

In an unsolicited testimonial, a member of the audience said that the Quillinans' success has not been due to "luck." Not only do they maintain their store beautifully but the owners are always on hand to greet and deal with the public. And they are community minded. As just one example of this spirit, local builders were employed to do the construction work on the new store.

Steve brought to the meeting a display of pictures dating back to Snyder's Hotel and the old and new Miller's Markets. He and his brother are interested in expanding this collection which can be viewed on the front wall of the store as you pass through the checkout counter.