

**The big 6-0: Town and Country celebrating six decades in Hoisington**

By **MIKE COURSON**

Running a business is hard. Running a family-owned grocery store in the era of super stores is even more difficult. Over the last 60 years, the Deutsch family has seen just about everything – including a tornado – but they continue to serve Hoisington and surrounding communities at Town and Country Supermarket.

“We’ve been through changes, we’ve been through a tornado, we’ve been through cancer, we’ve been through the death of my father,” said Randy Deutsch, owner. “Sixty years is a long time.”

**A store is born**

Ray and Dolores broke into the grocery business with a small store in Susank in 1952. A few years later, they were approached by the Bogarts company out of Concordia about building a store in Hoisington. The competition was stiff at the time – there were seven other grocery stores in the then town of about 5,800 people.

Ray and I.C. Walters opened the first Town and Country Supermarket in February 1956. Ray purchased a former skating rink and turned it into a strip mall that featured a bowling alley, pharmacy, doctor’s office, hairdresser, contractor’s office, and optometrist.

“The pharmacy and doctor’s office anchored it on the south and we

were the anchor on the north side,” Dolores said of the grocery store.

Some 60 years later, Dolores still remembers those other seven stores by name and location. Eventually, the railroad pulled out of Hoisington. Then the oil patch dried up. The other grocery stories began closing their doors.

“Hoisington used to be bigger,” Randy said. “The railroad was huge in this town. When it pulled out of Hoisington, it took the heart and soul. Back then, an engineer, a fireman, a brakeman, all those guys on the railroad were some of the top wage earners. They all got taken from here. Most of them moved to Salina.”

C.O. Mammals was one of the last competitors. The business was purchased by another entrepreneur but could not survive. The Deutsch family bought the building in an auction and it is now the home of USD 431. Central Street Market, the final competition, closed its doors in the mid-1980s.

**First of its kind**

The original Town and Country was an 11,000 square-foot facility with 7,000 square feet of shopping space. It was the biggest store in the area at the time.

“We were twice the size of the Dillons store in Great Bend,” said Dolores. “We were the first ones, in 1956, to have casket freezers. We were quite something in this town.”



**DOLORES DEUTSCH**

It was a different era then. Microwaves had been invented but would not be a fixture in most American households for another 30-plus years. TV dinners were gaining in popularity in 1956, but shopping at the store then was far different than it is today.

“None of our meat was frozen,” Dolores said. “It was all fresh. Frozen vegetables and fruits were something brand new. After a while, the pizzas and things like that came out.”

Goods for the store came from the Bogarts warehouse in Concor-

dia. Unloading those trucks could be a job in and of itself.

“They’d have one separate truck for beef and it came in on rails: sides, quarters,” Randy said. “Unloading a truck, you had to be a man. Some of those things would weigh 180 pounds. We’d hang them in our walk-in, and my dad, who was a butcher, had to horse those things out on the block and start cutting.”

“Now everything’s boxed beef. Everything comes vacuum packed and they do most of the cutting for you. Everything comes in already packaged and all they do is rotate, keeping the dates fresh and throwing out the out-dated stuff.”

Surviving the times At one time, the big grocery story in Hoisington was a must-stop for area families. The 10-mile trip south to Great Bend was not always practical so they shopped locally.

“There used to be a lot of farmers in here,” said Dolores. “Small towns like Beaver, Odin, Susank eventually didn’t have a store, Otis, Olmitz – all these little towns didn’t have stores and they still don’t. At that time, it wasn’t as easy to get to Great Bend. Now, it’s just easier.”

“We have become a very mobile society,” Randy said. “I’d say in the 1980s is when that started. When I first came back here, we weren’t

open on Sundays because no one else was. All of a sudden, convenience stores started popping up. Then we had to be open on Sundays because they were.

“That’s tough. When you own a place, normally you’re here seven days a week. You have to be. If I’m here, I open it seven days a week.”

**Surviving natural disasters**

Town and Country Supermarket survived all the little misfortunes over the years – failed generators, high electric bills – but it barely survived April 21, 2001. That night, the store was directly in the path of an EF-4 tornado that completely destroyed the business. The Deutsch family had a decision to make: rebuild or move on?

Dolores lost her home in the tornado, and the family could not foresee the arrival of a Super Walmart just 10 miles down the road, but the decision was made to stay. It turned out to be a fortunate one.

The new 19,000 square-foot supermarket, this time facing north, opened 13 months after the tornado. Just three months into its new life, Randy’s daughter was diagnosed with Leukemia. The family would have to move to St. Louis for a year while she underwent a bone marrow transplant.

“I keep thinking it was probably a blessing for us that we did re-open,” said Dolores. “Had he worked for another company, they wouldn’t have given him a whole year off. Here, we could work it out so he could take it off and be with his daughter.”

**The store must go on**

Town and Country continues to survive, a battle at a time. With so many things that can go wrong on a daily basis, the store is just one stroke of bad luck away from disaster.

“When you open in the morning, it’s not like opening up a furniture store because the furniture doesn’t go out of date and all you have is a heater and an air conditioner,” Randy said. “You open this place, you have compressors that run to keep our stuff cold. If that goes down, you have melted ice cream, you have product to throw away. Are your employees going to show up? It’s always something. To run a grocery store it takes a lot of people. It’s expensive.”

Some stores have emergency systems for instances when the coolers lose power. Town and Country does not have an emergency system, but the store is rarely unmanned for more than a few hours. That did not help Randy in one such event after his daughter’s wedding.

“For two weeks, I virtually lived here because we couldn’t keep our medium-temp compressors working,” he said. “It was a mess. Those are the times I’ve seen people sell stores.”

High electric prices in Hoisington have been a constant battle for the store. That issue came to a head a few years ago during a particularly hot summer.

“We had single ladies coming here in tears because their electric bills were higher than their house payments,” Randy said. “We ended up forming a task force and approached the city. “I went to a council

meeting one evening and told them they weren’t going to have this grocery store much longer if they didn’t do something about the electrical, and I was serious. We were paying 14 or 15 cents a kilowatt hour. In a grocery store, you cannot afford to do that. After two or three years, they reacted.”

**Keeping it quality**

The trend of society in 2016 is to keep things cheap and easy. Even though there is little margin for error in the profitability of a grocery store, the Deutsch family has not let that compromise quality.

“They love our meat,” Dolores said of the customers. “We have good, fresh meat. My late husband used to say quality is going to speak a lot longer than price. Another thing I think helps us is our meat department is open. It’s not in a backroom someplace. People can talk to them and see how clean it is.”

Along with a butcher who has worked in the store for more than 40 years, the store features a real bakery with goods made completely from scratch.

“All the grocery people tell us we have to go to thaw-and-sale,” Randy said. “We have never done that. Our bakery is from scratch. I’ll put our donuts up against anyone’s. Do we make any money on that? Our help comes in at 1 a.m. These other grocery stores thaw them out and put them out. We still bake ours.”

“In the grocery business you do some really stupid things. I go to the post office about every week and buy \$500 in stamps, then sell them for the price we paid for them. We have copy machines and fax machines. You get people in your store and you hope they might buy something else. The donuts? We get people from all around who come in to buy our donuts.”

The store also offers a deli with the “best fried chicken around,” and customer service is a trademark at the store. Employees help bag and carry out groceries, and home deliveries are also available for patrons who are unable to come to the store.

**60 years and beyond**

The end result is a family-owned grocery store that has survived in spite of everything. “Dolores knows everybody,” said Randy. “She’s friends with everybody. You just have to be polite and try to give (the customers) the best shopping experience you can. That’s all we have going for us. Can we compare pricing to Walmart? We try but we can’t.”

“We have our loyal customers and we appreciate the heck out of them. It’d be just as easy for them to get in their cars and drive to Walmart.”

Loyal employees have also been the key to success. Dolores has been on the payroll for nearly 60 years and still logs about 20 hours a week. The butcher and produce man have been at the store for 40-plus years. Just recently, the store had four octogenarians in its employ.

“Thanks to the customers and our great, loyal employees,” Randy said. “We couldn’t run this place without them. We’ve been here 60 years because of our customers and employees. We’re just along for the ride.”

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