

Deering's has kept it 'a neighborhood' thing for 55 years

BY HEATHER JOHNSON DUROCHER
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Bob and Sue Sommerville like their neighborhood grocery store for its great products like homemade jerky. You just can't beat the shop's convenient location only two doors down from their home either, they say.

But what the couple loves most about living near longtime Traverse City store Deering's Market & Deli is how well they've gotten to know its owners. "They always had a nice meat market. It started out as a convenience thing," said Bob, a Union Street resident since 1968. "Then Paul (Deering) became a friend of ours."

Paul Deering, 80, owned the store up until 1996, when son Jerry took over. Paul remains a fixture at the store, however, and neighbors like the Sommersvilles say he's always had a strong presence in the neighborhood. "If there ever was any kind of problem in the neighborhood, or any kind of emergency, Paul was there, and the first thing he said was, 'What can I do?'" Sue said. "That's the way he is and always was," said Bob, who recalled how Paul years ago started an

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— Jerry Deering, owner of Deering's Market & Deli in Traverse City

"unofficial wayward teenage program" that put kids to work at his store.

"He ran that like a boot camp almost. He did a lot of good doing that," he said.

Both Bob and Sue were among family and friends who attended Paul Deering's recent 80th birthday celebration.

Such close-knit relationships between a business and neighborhood are often more the exception than the rule these days with the prevalence of big-box stores and people moving into outer-lying subdivisions. For Deering's Market and its many loyal customers, it's just the way it is.

"We're probably in there every other day," said Bob Sommerville, who nowadays enjoys taking his grandchildren to the store for treats. "We see a lot of neighborhood people when we go. It's a good neighborhood experience."

Jerry Deering, 51, is proud of the store's history and commitment to the community. His grandfather, Thomas Deering, opened the store at 827 Union Street in 1931; "Great Grandpa Deering" operated the original store in Empire.

"The neighborhood is really good to us and takes care of us, and we try to take care of them," said Jerry, one of five children, who three years ago opened another location at 1142 Barlow Street. "You get to know so many people. When they come in they're more like friends than customers. When I'm in the back, I'll yell up to people, joke with them. It's more of a family atmosphere than strictly a business. We're serious, but still have fun."

Consider how the Deering family helps the neighborhood celebrate holidays: on Halloween, Jerry stands outside the Union Street

store handing out candy to trick-or-treaters.

"I went through three 5-gallon buckets of candy," he said. "For Thanksgiving we sell some fresh turkeys and smoked turkeys and for Christmas smoked turkey, our old-fashioned ham and prime rib — bone in and boneless and tenderloin."

The Union Street store also is known for its myriad international foods

"It's a lot of eastern European food — candy, meat, special sausages, cookies, canned goods, bottled water from Europe, some pop from Eastern Europe, too," said Jerry, who began offering these products about five years ago after hiring a man from the Ukraine and learning that a demand existed in the area for such items.

The store remains very much a family affair; Jerry's wife of 25 years, Deb, helps out as does sons Paul, 23, Jake, 21 and a University of Michigan student, and James, 16, who attends West Senior High School.

Operating a family business comes with a few challenges.

"99 percent of the time it's great," Jerry said. Chuckling, he added, "Though it can get pretty rough sometimes when you

work with your dad, your sons, and wife comes in and she has her own ideas."

As the oldest son, Paul works full-time, overseeing much of the store's popular and ever-growing jerky business. The store now produces more than 26 varieties of beef, including turkey, pork, elk, venison and buffalo.

"The jerky we make, it's technically not considered jerky. It's technically considered a beef stick because of the high moisture to protein ratio," the younger Paul Deering said.

"And we've been making that since '78" Paul, who plans to take over the business when his dad retires, feels good about the family tradition behind Deering's. "I used to work for my grandpa, working in the back room helping make sausage and jerky and whatever needed to be done — even washing dishes," he said.

"Me and my two other brothers spent quite a bit

of time down here on our summers off. It's fun — the atmosphere and hearing stories my grandpa tells about him and his brother."

Paul tried college, but ultimately knew his heart belonged at the family store.

"I just decided, why keep going to college if I know I want to work at the store and I pretty much know all about the business anyway?" he said. "I was living in Lansing at the time and I missed being up here. I knew what I wanted to do."

To be sure, this is good news to the store's many fans. As Bob Sommerville described the treasure that is Deering's Market, "It's a neighborhood thing."

Learn more about the store at www.deerings.com. Call the Union Street store at 947-6165; the Barlow location at 947-6842.

Heather Johnson Durocher is a local freelance writer.

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Bob Sommerville, Traverse City

Forecast

FROM PAGE 1

holidays is based on an overall strong retail year up to this point.

"There is always a lot to take into consideration," Schmitz said, "but we've been busy all along, we've had great weather and the right mood for people to be in downtown and the season is coming up where people are going to be shopping. The more challenging side to that is that we don't always have a particular brand name or specific item. That's when we get more creative."

Annie's is carrying a new Games & Gizmos section to respond to what Schmitz calls an "explosion in the traditional and family board games line"

"We can't compete head to head with catalogues," he said, "but we can offer some of the coolest, most fun and interesting games we can find — and people can look at and learn about them on the spot."

Traverse City resident Tressa Ford — wife and working mom — looks forward to everything the holidays bring, which means a schedule filled with too many options for any one weekend night to the last minute rush to ensure that the large extended family

she buys for each have exactly the right gift.

"I'm a firm believer in spreading my trade around, so I like to shop everywhere," Ford said.

"Sometimes where I go depends on what or who I'm looking for, but I always make it a point to go downtown, because that's where I find the holiday feel of Christmas shopping in a small town where you run into people on the streets and people in the stores know your name. That's what takes the experience beyond just going to buy something."

With a husband and two children, and many nieces, nephews and close family friends, Ford's shopping list has been a lengthy one in the past. A recent holiday tradition in the household is that on her husband's side of the family, the brothers and sisters don't buy for each other, only the children.

"On my side," she explained, "the adults take the amount of money we would usually spend on each other and put it towards a needy family in the area. There's a giving tree at our church, Trinity Lutheran, and there are always people who could use their load lifted a bit. And isn't that what the holidays are really about?"

Nancy Sundstrom is a local freelance writer.

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