

## Little Chute Historical Society 2010 Cemetery Walk

### GEORGE M. HERMSEN

My name is George M. Hermesen, I was born in 1888 on a farm just North of Little Chute, where Buchanan Street meets Evergreen Drive I worked on the farm for a few years prior to going to work at Combined Locks Paper Co. I didn't stay there very long as I didn't particularly care for the mill work, as I preferred being more outside and relating with people.

In 1915 I started the general merchandize business with my brother-in-law, George F. Look. The building we rented was previously a tavern and dance hall which coincidentally was owned by my father in law 25 years before. It was then moved about 100 feet west of the corner of Depot and Main streets when a new Lamers hotel was to be built. We rented this building for \$10 a month for the first four months then \$20 a month. After six months we two partners purchased it from John "Buttermilk" John Jansen on July 21, 1915, which was also a memorable day as my oldest son Jerry was born on that day.

Starting the business with little investment was a challenge, fortunately the business grew rapidly. Other competitors were P.A. Gloudemans Dept. Store, Weyenberg Grocery and in the 20's Hanegraaf came on board. Casey Hanegraaf and I were probably the more aggressive grocers in Little Chute sharing the majority of business. Although we were strong competitors we were friends and my children were friends of their children. Casey and I were part of the original group of seven grocers which formed a cooperative called United Grocers, buying in volume and advertising as a group. This company was eventually sold to Roundy's, and again sold to Jacks Pizza, which in turn became a Kraft holding.

On my one acre of land at 905 East Main Street, we raised corn and potatoes which we then sold in the store. In addition to raising produce for the store I raised a family of 10 children. Our home was purchased for \$1450.00 including the lot In 1940 I purchased another lot just west of the cemetery. We then built a two story colonial home for \$10,000.00

In 1918 my partner George Look was drafted into U.S. Military. I had three children, therefore I was not called and Mr. Look then served his country. Upon his return George Look elected to start a meat market in which he became very successful.

Delivery service was initially provided by horse and wagon. We had two rigs, which were kept on a lot where the present bank drive- in is now. On one occasion it was necessary to use the horses for other than delivery of groceries. In 1924 it was used to transport Mrs. Biersteker to the cemetery after passing away giving birth to little Johnny. The roads were impassable due to snow.

A tragedy with one of the horses occurred when a young boy from Kimberly threw a firecracker under the horse and when it broke loose the filly punctured its side and it was necessary to have the horse shot. On another occasion a bus hit the horses' wagon, resulting in no serious damage to the horses.

My first delivery truck was purchased in 1920, to replace the horses in the summer time, however the horses were still needed for winter deliveries as road conditions were bad in winter. Mr. Wildenberg, a woodworker built the body on a Ford chassis. He worked out of the red building next to his brother

Henry, the blacksmith on Van den Broek Street. Henry was very critical of motorized vehicles he preferred working with our horses. In 1924 I purchased another truck which is shown on a picture of it in a 1925 parade with seven of my children with the slogan "we sell and raise our family on Silver Buckle Products".

Business remained good and continued to grow rapidly. In 1922 the Inspection Bureau determined that I was doing too much business out of the existing store. I was told to expand the store and add a warehouse, which I did. A special event also occurred in that year, my wife Anna gave birth to twins, Joan and Joseph.

In 1935 a new truck was purchased to replace an older one. The year 1936 was a bad year for weather. It was extremely hot in summer and very cold and lots of snow in winter. While making a delivery during a bad snow storm one of our trucks was snowed in for five days just north of Rose Hill Road.

In the earlier days of business I had help from my two brothers Henry and Herb and my two sisters Mary and Martha. This helped me a considerably before my own children started helping in the business.

Christmas time was a very busy time. We had our sales people visit homes with samples of various candies in a carrying case, which we would lay-away until Christmas. Toys were a big item at that time, you can see from the displayed booklet, for example fancy or embossed ornaments for 5 cents, tinker toy set 75 cents, musical toy top 10 cents, and a harmonica for 10 cents. Because Dec 8 was a holy day and the store closed. This was a day that we cut down Christmas trees. We would use the Heart Rubber Co large truck. Heart Rubber Co. was owned by me and brothers Herb, Henry, and Peter. Peter managed the plant when we made automobile tires. During WWII we made tires for bombers. After the war we made church kneelers. The plant was subsequently sold to Crystal Print.

I always felt that my expertise was more in buying than selling. I would buy flour, sugar, potatoes and feed in carload or truckload quantities. Purchasing in carload quantities was a little more difficult as they had to be unloaded at the Little Chute depot. We had to work very fast to unload these cars in order to avoid paying demurrage. Vinegar and sour kraut were purchased in 50 gal barrels weighing as much as 350 lbs.

On one occasion I sold some cabbage plants to a farmer in Stephenville, with the understanding that he would pay for them at harvest. At harvest prices of cabbage was so low he wasn't going to harvest it, but I could take all I wanted for the hauling we loaded the truck heavily and sold cabbage for 2 cents a pound, we sold it all.

The store was really a general merchandise store as we sold many different items to serve our customers. Besides groceries we sold Philco radios, ABC wash machines. Pittsburg Paints, bolts of dry goods, union made overalls, jackets, chicken feeds, (as many families raised chickens) and kerosene which replaced wood burning stoves. Sons Jerry and Bernie were called on many times to make repairs to radios and wash machines.

Due to very few people having telephones we would call on them one day to take orders and deliver the next day. We did this twice a week and had routes in Kaukauna, Kimberly, and Combined Locks in addition to Little Chute.

Sunday was always a big trade day as farmers would shop after church. Father Sprangers put an end to that saying this was the Lords Day. Saturday then became the big night to shop. At 8:00 p.m. the fire whistle would sound indicating the weekly drawing was being held and prizes were being awarded, a promotion of the business men's association. Shortly after it was changed to Friday night.

The name Little Chute Cash Grocery was somewhat of a misnomer as credit was given to customers quite readily and continued when the name Hermsen Grocery was incorporated. The depression years were very difficult times. People were out of work and had limited money: We carried many families on the so-called books in order for them to be able to have something to eat. Some families owed as much as \$1,000.00, this was a big chunk to absorb. Most families eventually paid even though it took years. I had to mortgage my home and store to keep operating. Finally in 1937 I was able to pay off the mortgage to the bank. One family from an inheritance paid off a large bill. I was so happy I went out and bought a 1937 Oldsmobile for \$1000.00 from Pete Vanden Heuvel.

In the early forties I bought a popcorn stand from Ralph Lowell, a druggist in town. It was between the drug store and my grocery store. Son Paul operated this along with son Bernie. We sold popcorn for 5 cents for a one lb. bag. Candy bars were three for a dime and Pepsi cola was 5 cents for 12 oz. We often took this machine to the Darboy picnics and Outagamie County Fair in Seymour. Our stand was next to John Nygren's, who served hamburgers and was supposedly the inventor of the hamburger.

World War 11 was another tough time, with the shortages of items such as sugar, coffee and meat products. We had price controls by the Office of Price Administration to prevent prices going out of line. In addition to collecting money for our products we had to collect ration stamps. Red stamps for meats and green stamps for canned goods. Coffee and sugar stamps were individual stamps. Tokens were given for change for odd amounts such as eight tokens from a ten point stamp.

As an advertising promotion in 1940 we had Aunt Jemima come to town. We offered free pancakes made by Aunt Jemima herself. This was a special treat for the school kids as, they lined up for a block away to get several pancakes with Aunt Jemima syrup on them. She stayed in Little Chute for several days at one of my employee's home as being black she was not allowed to stay in a hotel in Appleton. We did have her entertain at our home one evening, as she was a very talented piano player. While playing quite frequently she would play the song "How dry I am" I knew what that meant.

Although I was in my sixties it was necessary to being my own delivery boy at times, as it was difficult to obtain help during the war years. I ran out of family. I did suffer a stroke while visiting my daughter Lorraine in Davenport, Iowa at Easter time in 1949. This put an end to my workdays. My three youngest children Imelda (Toddy), Paul and Margery along with my middle son Bernie, who left his regular job on a leave of absence to assist in the business for a period of time. When he returned to his regular job, the three youngest continued the business until closing.

I could see the handwriting on the wall in the late 40's as to the future of the business such as ours and other grocers. People had cars and were more mobile. Larger stores were coming on stream with huge aisles, better lighting, improved refrigeration and many choices of products. The smaller stores were on the way out. At one time there were as many as ten grocers in Little Chute.

The business was curtailed in 1951. The building was then rented to the Luedkes for a 5 cent to a dollar store. When Luedkes moved to their present location it was sold to Carl Verstegen, who had it tom down and built a drug store. It is now home to the "Pump House" bar.

Thanks, Little Chute, for a great ride.





