



CAPTURING THE PULSE

Owen County Businesses Endure

By Charlee Beasor

I meet Rob Babbs on a sunny and unseasonably warm day in November, just outside his family's longtime grocery business, Babbs SuperValu.

The sign reads: "Babbs Supermarket: Serving the community since 1928." The parking lot sits just off West Morgan Street, where State Road 46 and U.S. 231 converge through Spencer, the Owen County seat and home to about 2,300 Hoosiers.

We head inside and Babbs is immediately bombarded by business, greeting customers and employees like family. Unexpectedly (to me, at least), he goes behind the customer service counter, picks up the microphone for the store's sound system and announces my presence to the entire store. He instructs everyone to comply with my requests for photos or interviews.

I was a little flushed from the attention, but everyone just nods and chuckles as they continue on with their business. You can tell Babbs has done that before.

He shows me around his office near the entrance to the store and points to photos of the supermarket's original location when his grandparents started the business in 1928. The store is on its third adaptation today, having expanded each time.

Babbs' parents owned the company until

his father, Robert, passed away in his sleep at age 74.

"He was at the store and then just didn't come back on Monday," he recalls.

Further down the wall, Babbs points to a signed photo of Bob Knight. The former Indiana University basketball coach used to fish down the road and they became buddies when Knight would frequent the store.

Megan Poff scans customer items as Larry Huffman bags groceries. They're laughing about something Larry said, and I ask how long he's been an employee at the market.

"A couple years," he says. "I'm a retired machinist and I'm having a ball. This is my second time working here. When I was 15, I cleaned the store and then worked the meat department for about six months. I grew up with this family."



Babbs SuperValu – which has been a staple of Spencer since 1928 – is one of several long-standing businesses in Owen County. A family-type atmosphere exists among employees and customers.



That’s the key, he says: family.

“This is a big family. They give me a hard time, and we have a good time,” Huffman adds.

People make the difference

It’s a snapshot of an hour in the life at Babbs SuperValu, a business that has lasted three generations and nearly 90 years despite increased competition in the grocery industry (there is a Wal-Mart in town; Babbs also owns the Save-A-Lot across the street from Wal-Mart).

Marilyn Jackson, tourism director for the Sweet Owen Convention & Visitor’s Bureau, explains just how the longtime family businesses have succeeded through the years: the personal touches of a small town.

“We used to have a dime store, a dress shop, a paint store and other different things when Wal-Mart came in. But I do my grocery shopping at Babbs. I know their products are going to be fresh. I can say, ‘Hey Rob, you don’t have such and such,’ (and he’ll get it). There’s a lady in town who is a southern lady and she liked a particular type of flour and Robby got it for her. You’re not going to get that at Wal-Mart,” Jackson asserts.

Gwen Tucker, executive director of the Owen County Chamber of Commerce and Economic Development Corporation, nods to Babbs’ decision to expand his business and bring a Save-A-Lot to town.

“You capture the demographic here; there are a lot of folks that need the more economical options,” she asserts.

Babbs acknowledges the competition and says it’s a positive for the community overall.

“Competition is not bad, because it makes you a little better. You have to start doing things outside of your comfort zone,” he says.

First state park

Owen County is home to the first state park in Indiana: McCormick’s Creek State Park. The land was secured and signed over to the state of Indiana in December 1916, in honor of the state’s centennial.

Sam Arthur, McCormick’s Creek State Park naturalist, explains that Dr. Frederick Denkwalter was a wealthy Indianapolis physician who took time to recover in Owen County after suffering from heat stroke. In 1888, Denkwalter purchased a farmhouse and land that he utilized as a “sanitarium,” which Arthur likens to the mineral health

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spas that were popular during the era. When Denkewalter died in 1914, his family sold the property to the Indiana Parks Commission and that group (headed by Colonel Richard Lieber) signed the land over to the state.

The Canyon Inn, which is the oldest state park inn, sits on the footprint of the farmhouse that was part of the Denkewalter property.

Despite a “sketchy” accounting of exactly how the money was raised to purchase the land from the Denkewalter family, Arthur says the official story is that the Indiana Parks Commission paid three-quarters of the \$520,050 asking price for the land, and the residents of Owen County raised the remaining one-quarter (with local children even contributing through a penny drive).

“We just happened to be in the right place at the right time. We’re lucky the parks commission did turn their attention down here, and we’re lucky the people of Owen County recognized what resources we had available to us,” he says.

Arthur asserts the tourism that results from the state park and inn is intricately tied to the local business community.

“We have campers who will come in and spend weeks with us,” he maintains. “That’s going to show up in Rob Babbs’ grocery store. They deliver food up to the camps. The restaurants see an uptick ... tourism means they’re buying gas, groceries, stopping into your restaurants and your shops.”

Babbs says the business the grocery store did during the summer months alone was enough to keep the company in the black all year long.

“That goes back to the 1930s. For our business, financially, it was very important. We had four delivery trucks delivering every hour on the hour,” he offers. “There were times, and I remember in the ’70s and ’80s, the business we did in the summer put enough money on our bottom line to make it through the year.”

The impact of those campers has lessened over the years as there are more choices of camp locations, and advances in food preservation means campers can go without regular deliveries.

Natural resources in Owen County also include Cataract Falls in the Lieber State Recreation Area and the Owen-Putnam State Forest.

History runs deep

The county is home to a number of businesses that started in the late 1800s and



Spencer Hardware & Lumber Company, started in 1865, is another long-time business in Owen County. Gary Boruff (left) has been an employee for over 25 years.



Community service and volunteerism are also critical in a small community. Rob Babbs (right) was a torchbearer for the Indiana Bicentennial Torch Relay and has been honored with various awards for giving back to the community.

early 1900s that are still in operation (despite being bought by other families or having closed for periods at a time and then re-opened).

Jackson notes that the Cataract General Store, which is about 25 minutes north of Spencer, was established in 1864 and has changed ownership hands several times in recent years. She says it was recently purchased by local residents, who are running the store and upgrading the offerings.

Another is the Cataract Schoolhouse, which dates back to 1886. A local woman purchased the schoolhouse and Jackson mentions the goal is to refurbish it so children can attend on field trips and learn about Indiana history.

Two other Spencer gems include Our

Community Bank, which has been locally owned since 1911 (it has been known by various names over the years); and West & Parish & Pedigo Funeral Home, which began in 1919. And the Casebeer & Sons Sawmill is now run by the fifth generation of the Klaiber and Casebeer families.

Down the road on State Road 46 from Babbs SuperValu is Spencer Hardware & Lumber Company (most recently known as Hanlon Brothers Hardware). Gary Boruff, an employee of the store for more than 25 years, gives me a quick history lesson on the business: It began in 1865 as Bayh’s Hardware and was in the Bernard Bayh family until 1983. The Hanlon family purchased the operation and then sold the business to the current owner.



A farmhouse from the 1800s became the site of the Canyon Inn at McCormick’s Creek State Park. The property for the first state park (below) was purchased in 1916 in honor of Indiana’s centennial. One of the oldest businesses in the county (closed and re-opened over time) is the Cataract General Store, located about 25 minutes north of Spencer.



The full-service hardware store carries a little of everything and the goal is to treat people like they’re shopping in a small town, Boruff says. It’s been special to see people’s children grow up to be adults and then start shopping there for their own homes, he adds.

It takes a (small) village

For all the talk of small businesses, the biggest industry in the county is the medical field; the two largest companies are Boston Scientific and Cook Urological.

Babbs points to those sorts of outside investments as an example of something his father cautioned: Don’t alienate people who aren’t from Spencer or Owen County.

“A lot of the people here who have made the biggest difference and have done more for our county in terms of progress are people that have moved in here,” he offers. “These are good people and you’ll die on the vine if you don’t keep bringing new people in. Let them get involved and have a say.”

Jackson herself is a transplant (from central Indiana) who

decided to stay.

“We fell in love with it down here,” she shares. “This is one of the most friendly places you can visit in the state of Indiana. I think that’s why these businesses are long-running businesses.”

The feeling, Babbs says, that people get when they visit his store or others in town is the important part. That’s the charm of the small town, and it’s what keeps people coming back.

“You were in the store that day,” he reminds in a later conversation. “I got on the microphone, introduced you, who you were, what you were doing. I kidded everyone. That was a little bit joking, corny or whatever. But that works. And you’re not going to forget coming to Spencer.”

“For nothing else, that’s our job, to make sure that when you come here you say, ‘I like that place’ ... and what we want when our customers leave is to say, ‘I like shopping there. I like that place.’”

“And you’ll forget what I said 20 years from now, but you’ll never forget the way I made you feel.”

I think he just might be on to something.

RESOURCES: Sam Arthur, McCormick’s Creek State Park, at www.mccormickscreekstatepark.com | Rob Babbs, Babbs SuperValu, at www.supervalu.com | Marilyn Jackson, Sweet Owen Convention & Visitor’s Bureau, at www.sweetowencvb.org | Gwen Tucker, Owen County Chamber of Commerce and Economic Development Corporation, at www.owencountyindiana.org