

The Family Business

How do you begin a narrative of your family business?

I started working in the warehouse of our family wholesale hardware company at age 12 (in 1932) working half days and just doing small chores. I soon was old enough and strong enough to do a "man's" work and go the full 40 hours a week during my summer vacations. It was very hard work, but I loved every moment of it. I was shedding my baby fat, doing a real man's job and enjoying the fine men that made up our work force. They teased me unmercifully, sent me on ridiculous errands and gave me jobs no one wanted to perform. I mopped warehouse floors, screwed nuts on bolts that had come separately from the manufacturer by mistake, weighed and boxed washers in 5# boxes from their 200# cartons, etc. But it was fun, interesting and a continual learning process. Our inventory consisted of nearly 20,000 separate items and to work customers orders quickly and accurately required a good memory and careful reading of our salesman's handwritten orders. There were several of us young fellows who, as order clerks, did the running about, up and down stairs, filling the orders and placing the items in proper order on the packing table. "Cliff" Berquist, our upstairs foreman, checked the orders, sent us back to correct our mistakes, then turned the goods over to the packers to be boxed and labeled and sent down the huge metal chute to the shipping department. The second and third floors of our warehouse housed the smaller, higher priced goods; the main floor and basement the large, heavy and less expensive goods such as nails, wire, fence, barbed wire, pipe, etc., etc. The boxed goods from "upstairs" and the heavy goods from "downstairs" were assembled on the shipping room floor, and taken every afternoon by our truck to the two railroad freight houses, the Rock Island and the CB&Q, since, except for the hardware picked up by nearby customers, everything was shipped by rail.

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Our company had ten salesmen, covering parts of Iowa, Illinois and Missouri, about a 75 mile radius around Burlington. They called on our major customers once a week, though some that were further away (and rail service was slower) only ordered every other week. We serviced hardware stores, general stores, lumber yards, sporting goods outlets and plumbing and heating and sheet metal contractors. Our salesmen carried huge catalogs listing, illustrating and pricing all of the merchandise we carried. The information was extremely detailed, and the catalog was truly an encyclopedia of general hardware. Year after year our top salesman was Ed Meyer, who lived in Monmouth and covered the Illinois territory from that city west to the Mississippi River. Ed was far from the general picture of the traveling salesman, being quiet, patient and extremely thorough. His customers came to count on his regular, timely sales call, his good advise on new items and vast hardware knowledge. Other regulars in our sales staff were Charles Logergrin from Galesburg; Harold Detterer, Burlington; Bill Pedrich, Fairfield and John Lillis,

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Oelwein. Ed Meyer and Harold Detterer wrote their orders in clear, easy to read script, and had we been allowed to do so, as order clerks, we would have picked their orders and put off the others as long as possible. Bill Pedrich, though an excellent salesman who wrote grand long orders, was the despair of the entire staff from sales manager to shipping clerk. Our salesmen traveled in their own private cars and mailed in their order every night from wherever they were staying. Generally, service was good, and their fat Drake Hardware envelopes were in our post office box the following morning.

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