

Rapacz

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regulations, shortages, and rationing of such common household staples as sugar, butter and meat.

"Competition in the grocery business has always been keen," said Mathew, "mostly from independent groceries in the earlier years, and later from larger and larger supermarkets."

Mathew said the family's once large store has really become quite small.

"Michael Rapacz and Son has survived as long as it has because of the personal services we provide and because of our excellent fresh meat department," said the younger Rapacz.

Mathew said fresh breakfast and Italian sausage is still made in the store, and hanging beef, cut in the store, is still used. He said that in most supermarkets, beef arrives in boxes, already boned.

Lots of area folks have worked at M. Rapacz and Son over the years, especially in the earlier times when the grocery business was much more labor intensive.

"In the early years it would take you a whole day to make homemade liver sausage," Mathew said.

"Chickens were kept in the basement in coops and were killed on the premises or sold live," Michael Jr. added.

The Rapacz' said St. Johnsville residents may remember the names John McGee, Fritz Wolinski, and John Yanko, dedicated M. Rapacz and Son employees for many years.

Many neighborhood boys were hired part-time to pack groceries and perform various odd jobs at the store.

"Of course family members played a large role in the success of the business," Mathew said. "My father (Michael Jr.) eventually took over the business as my grandfather aged."

Michael Rapacz, Sr. died in 1981, working part-time in the grocery business he founded until shortly before his death.

Today, the store is run by Michael Jr. and son Mathew, with occasional help from their wives, Mary and Laura.

Although he never received a formal education, Michael Rapacz Sr. loved to read, and over the course of a lifetime, amassed a huge collection of books, completed several correspondence courses, and was an honored member of many St. Johnsville area

civic groups.

Michael Rapacz Jr. is a graduate of St. Johnsville High School and attended Union College for a year before serving with the U.S. Army during WW II. He started working at the store as a young boy and made it his career after returning from the service.

The third generation son, Mathew, also graduated from St. Johnsville High School, and began working at the store while he was still attending classes there. Mathew obtained a bachelor of arts degree in history from Union College and a masters degree in public administration from SUNY at Albany. He began working full-time at the grocery store in 1975 to help with the family business.

A favorite of the kids of the 1920s and '30s remains an all-time favorite of kids today — penny candy. During the course of Michael and Mathew Rapacz' interview with the *Courier-Standard-Enterprise*, at least a dozen neighborhood kids came in to make their purchases of the sweet stuff, and several St. Johnsville grownups came in for their daily, or weekly grocery shopping stops. And always, a friendly smile and good conversation are a pleasant part of the shopping experience at the store.

One of the first things that catches a visitors eye upon entering the store is a very old, and very large meat cooler. "They don't make 'em like that any more," Michael said. The meat case is 20 feet in length and features a 20 foot, one piece triple pane glass front.

"We don't do any advertising, we never have, all of our customers are regulars, our only form of advertising is by word-of-mouth," Michael said. He said some business has always come in from simple curiosity of passersby.

Michael said that business is still good, but added that it gets tougher every year. "We're so small that the wholesalers consider us more of a nuisance than anything else," he said.

When asked if he would continue the business after his father retires, Mathew said no. "When dad retires, the store is going to close."

"If it were up to me," said Michael Jr., "I'd never retire. But there's a lot of pressure, (and) I'm looking forward to a little travel and sightseeing when I finally do retire."