

Enduring the years of change

Mrs. G thrives for decades in world of retailing

Monday, April 21, 2008

BY BILL MOONEY

LAWRENCE -- In 1935, a gallon of gas cost an average of 10 cents, the Marx Brothers had moviegoers rolling in the aisles with "A Night at the Opera," and Amelia Earhart became the first person to fly solo from Hawaii to California.

That same year, Beatrice Greenberg and her husband Abe, who were married in 1932, opened New Jersey Plumbing Supplies on East State Street in Trenton.

Much has changed in 73 years, but the business the Greenbergs established endures to this day. The store, now known as Mrs. G. TV & Appliance, has been on Route 1 in Lawrence for more than three decades. Greenberg, 94, who established her business in an age when female entrepreneurs had their work cut out for them, is a survivor.

But to listen to her tell it, there was no time while living in the shadow of the Great Depression to worry about being a woman business owner competing against male counterparts. "They would all say, 'What does she know?'" Greenberg said, imitating her male critics' dismissive tone. "But I used to bid on jobs and get them." And her competitors? "They're all gone," she said.

A longtime associate, account manager Carmen Zampino, explained that competitors would make the mistake of underestimating Greenberg because she was a woman. "She flew under the radar for a time," he said. "We took a lot of market share."

In 1935, the average cost of a new car was \$625, Parker Brothers released its board game Monopoly, and President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed the Social Security Act into law.

Greenberg strikes one as someone more interested in completing a sale and making sure a customer is satisfied than in collecting Social Security.

"There wasn't anything too hard for me," she said from the front desk of Mrs. G recently as cars and trucks sped by on Route 1. "Whatever the customer wanted. You have to realize that there is a lot of work to it, and a lot of responsibility."

Even though the business has endured, some things have changed for Mrs. G.

The addresses where the couple hung out their shingle changed over the years. They moved to Broad Street in Trenton, then to Olden Avenue in Ewing. A gas explosion caused a fire that razed their store, so they worked out of their Lawrence warehouse for a time.

In the early 1970s, they opened a new store on Route 1 in Lawrence at a time when that highway was not the bustling thoroughfare it is today. Quaker Bridge Mall had not opened in Lawrence. The nearby portion of I-95 was just beginning to pour more traffic into the area.



MARTIN GRIFF/THE TIMES

Beatrice Greenberg, 94, still puts in time at her appliance store now run by her granddaughter, Debbie Schaeffer.

"There was nobody here on Route 1," Greenberg said. "There were two other little stores. There was one little store there, one little store there," she said, gesturing. "Before you knew it, everybody was near me." Wherever Mrs. G was located, though, one thing was constant: "The customers have been loyal, they just followed me wherever I went," Greenberg said.

The products they sold have changed over the years as well. The plumbing fixtures began to disappear in the mid-1940s, replaced by a variety of appliances such as stoves and refrigerators.

"The boys were coming home" from World War II and the baby boom was getting under way, Greenberg recalled. "They wanted this; they wanted that. I said, 'I'll get you anything you want.'" Greenberg satisfied her customers as well as her suppliers. In 2000, GE Appliances honored Greenberg for being one of its top independent retailers. Mrs. G sells other brands as well.

In 1935, the average cost of a new house was \$3,450, Elvis Presley was born, and Babe Ruth hit the last of his 714 home runs, a record that would last 39 years.

The business has constantly evolved from its beginnings 73 years ago when Greenberg, an Atlantic City native, and her Trenton-born husband decided to go into business for themselves. Not only does Mrs. G sell appliances, these days the expanded 20,000-square-foot business features showrooms with the latest in kitchen decor and flat-screen TVs as well as a conference room for businesspeople.

One other change is still felt. Her husband died about 15 years ago, and when Greenberg talked about it, her tone became softer. "It was hard on me," she said. "He was a hard worker just like me. We were always together." He would work the cash register while she worked on the sales floor with customers; they would start at about 7:30 a.m. and would often work more than 12 hours a day.

Greenberg handed the reins to her granddaughter, Debbie Schaeffer, in 2005, but she still comes in five days a week for a few hours each day, holding court from her desk at the front of the showroom, aisles of gleaming refrigerators, microwaves and other appliances behind her.

She has outlasted some big-name competitors: Crazy Eddie, American Appliance, Tops Appliance. Schaeffer, who holds a degree in civil engineering, salutes her grandmother as the face of the business, recognizable from ads in newspapers and television, and said customers will ask after her if they come in and she is not there.

"The store always came first to me," Greenberg said. "You have to love what you're doing. We were a household name. Now second and third generations are buying from me. You take care of people and give them good prices."