

Bill Reitz



In 1949, Bill Reitz started working in a grocery store in his Pennsylvania hometown; he was a high school student who needed a job. In 1998 he retired after 46 years in the food business, during which time he owned his own stores and later co-owned one of the largest supermarket chains in northeast Indiana.

“My neighbor when I was 14 years old owned a grocery store, and he was the first entrepreneur I knew,” Bill says. “I went to work for him and learned the importance of customer service.” Bill says that watching this business owner while working for him taught him lessons about customer service that would stay with Bill

forever.

After high school graduation, Bill wanted to go to college but neither he nor his family had the financial resources to enable him to go without also working. Because Ball State University was helping students attend college and find work to finance their education, Bill enrolled there. Bill completed that first academic year, then spent two years in the U.S. Army, serving his country in Korea. When he returned to Ball State on the GI bill he began working part-time at the local Marsh supermarket. “In 1958, I became Assistant Manager. Subsequently, I was transferred to the Fort Wayne Marsh stores, where I managed several stores.” Bill says.

In 1962, Bill met Don Scott and says “We hit it off immediately because we had similar backgrounds, including attending college at Ball State and grocery store work.”

At that time, Don owned three small grocery stores in Fort Wayne. After the men got to know each other, Don asked Bill to become his general manager and buy stock in the company.

Bill says. “We worked together in those stores until 1967, when I was ready to reach for my goal of owning my own store.” To make his goals possible, Don sold Bill one of the Scott’s stores. With that store, Bill started his own company, Reitz Stores, Inc.

Bill says it was a unique business relationship, one that “really worked best for both of us. To control costs and give customers the best value, Don and I recognized the opportunities to keep the Scott’s name on the store. So, while we were operating two separate companies, we had the same store name and were

using the same suppliers for our purchases.” Over the years, both companies expanded to include more store locations.

The Reitz family was also involved in the business. His wife, Caroll, managed the books for the first store. Their daughters, Laurie and Jean started working in the company as cashiers at the age of 16. Laurie’s husband, Steve Grashoff also worked for the company, growing with the business to eventually become its Vice President of Operations.

By the end of the 1970s, both Bill and Don were enjoying their work and the expansion of their businesses. They also recognized, however, the need to look at the future of the grocery industry.

“We saw the changes that were coming in the 1980s, which we believed would include larger, more modern stores and more competition,” Bill says. To meet the challenges they knew they would face, in 1979, Bill and Don merged their two companies, and 8 stores, into one company. Each had a 50 percent ownership; Don served as the company Chairman and Bill was its President and General Manager.

During the 1980s, the men expanded and replaced their smaller stores with superstores. They opened their ninth store in Pine Valley, in northern Allen County. As they continued to expand, the men increased the Scott’s stores market share in northeast Indiana from 5 percent to well over 50 percent.

They also believed in giving back to the community and looked at ways their company could be a good corporate citizen. “We had both lost family members to cancer, so when at one of these association meetings a retailer in West Virginia told us what he was doing to help fight cancer in his community, we knew that was what we wanted to do,” Bill says. “We held our first Scott’s Fight Cancer Day in 1979, and it was an annual event after that.”

The company grew by leaps and bounds during the 1980s. During that time the men owned 13 stores in strategic locations and continued their dedication to quality merchandise and value pricing. Bill says during those successful years, the competition was large chain retailers. Against this competition, Bill and Don worked to stay “in tune with the customer. We wanted them to be happy when they came in and when they left. We were growing and we were competitive in the marketplace. It was absolutely fun,” Bill says.

By the late 1980s, Bill and Don were again seeing a new future for grocery retailers. That future included intense competition from superstores and what Bill says was “the need to take on debt or collaborate with a larger partner to afford to do what needed to be done and done well.”

“We didn’t like what we saw regarding the debt that would need to be incurred, so we made the decision to find a larger partner. We sought a partner or buyer who would be responsive to the opportunities our stores still provided,” Bill says.

In 1991, the men merged their company with SuperValu. Bill continued as president for SuperValu. Bill says SuperValu wanted the Scott’s stores to continue operating as they had in the past because “they recognized the great relationships we had with customers in the community and the success that we had.”

When Bill retired in 1998, the Scott’s division included 22 stores.

“I loved my work and my community involvement,” Bill says. “I would encourage young people today to focus on what they think they like to do because chances are, that is what they will really like in the end. It will also be what they will be truly successful at with hard work and dedication.”