

June 15, 2007

Sweet's Jewelers: 81 years of service and going strong

BYLINE: BILL CHURCH BJ contributor

Downtown Fort Pierce has experienced many changes over the past 81 years, but one constant has been Sweet's Jewelers.

Rosalie Arnold, now 74, has been there for more than half a century, beginning work in the store in 1945 when she was just 12.

"I learned the business from my father and brother so I could wait on customers," Arnold said.

Arnold is the daughter of the former owner, John Noelke, who bought the store and building in 1943 from Lillian Sweet and her son, Ervin. The Sweet family opened the store in 1926, and along with East Coast Lumber, Sweet's is the longest continuing business in downtown Fort Pierce.

Arnold runs the store today with her daughter, Jan Russell. Both women credit the store's long-running success to custom designs and personal services that beat mall jewelry stores. Arnold said Sweet's doesn't buy in bulk.

"We hand pick all our jewelry from salespeople and shows," she said.

It was the coming of the Route 1 strip malls and then the bigger outlying malls which hurt many downtown businesses. But Sweet's Jewelry's customers stayed loyal.

"We stuck it out through the bad times because our customers stuck with us," Russell said. "And, they have provided great word-of-mouth referrals."

John Noelke had owned a jewelry store in Washington, Mo., a St. Louis suburb. That store is still owned by Arnold's cousins.

Noelke was a watchmaker and repaired jewelry. When he first moved to the Treasure Coast in 1938, however, he invested in citrus groves near Orange Avenue and 33rd Street.

Using his jewelry experience, he added Sweet's to the family enterprise in 1943. The store was extremely successful during World War II because of the naval amphibious base on the beach. Jewelry was in short supply as manufacturing plants switched to ammunition

production and supplied jewelry only to already established customers, like Sweet's.

Servicemen flocked to the store to buy jewelry to take home to their wives, sweethearts and mothers. The store would be almost stripped bare and the Noelke family would buy every piece they could when the jewelry salesmen dropped in, Arnold recalls.

She said the business has changed somewhat because of different tastes and rising prices.

"Women today seem to want bigger diamonds," she said. "And the price of gold is now \$700 a gram, compared to \$18 a gram when I started in the business."

Noelke worked until he was 86, and he was 99 when he passed away in 1983.

John and his wife, Alma, had five children, three of whom worked in the jewelry store. In addition to Rosalie Arnold, her brother, Lee, retired just two years ago and her sister Margaret, still does pearl restringing from her home. Two other brothers who worked in other fields are deceased.

The family owners have also been blessed with long-term employees. Saleswoman Ann Demanbro worked there for 30 years before her death a decade ago. Saleswoman Anita Young has worked at the store for 21 years and jewelry designer and repair specialist Michael Huff is a 15-year employee.

"It's a friendly place to work with lots of nice customers," Young said.

Copyright, 2008, Scripps Treasure Coast Newspapers, Used here with permission. No additional reproduction or distribution of this article in any form is permitted without the written approval of Scripps Treasure Coast Newspapers (<http://www.tcpalm.com>).