

Bob Thomsen Sr.

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Ken Mcnaughton

Marquette, Michigan

(Ken Mcnaughton) Bob when and how were you persuaded to go into business?

(Bob Thomsen Sr.) Well this was back in 1945 right after the war my brother in-law and myself were sitting around the table, down in Flint, Michigan he was an accountant at AC and I was a young engineer at the Fisher Body division and we both seemed to not be too happy or satisfied with our role in the automotive industry. And we wanted to try something and the thought came about going in business and we more or less kidded about it and all of a sudden we got a little serious about it. So we at that time there was such a shortage of consumer goods, whether it be sporting goods or cars or automobiles or appliances or what have you. So that's why we thought it be a good time to get into business. We had a little capital and we'd figured with our severance pay we could add to it and originally we decided that we'd get into the appliance business, we were contacted by a firm down in Detroit called the North American Products Company. And they in turn were going to make appliances, stoves, oil burners, hand irons, and what have you. So that was our contact and now where are we going to settle after deliberation, we knew were going into the north we had talked about northern Michigan, around Roscommon and that area. And then we started talking about the Upper Peninsula, neither one of us had been either further than the straights. So Walt he quit his job first and came up to the Upper Peninsula and with the investigation of the capital of the Upper Peninsula and where the business world seemed to be focusing at that time was in the Marquette area. So that's why we came into the Marquette area. We came down here and opened up in November of 1945 in a little store on Third Street, 727 North Third I'll never forget it, it used to be the old wicker shop they called it here in Marquette. And that's right now where the Freewheeler's is yeah they bought the building here this spring and they moved in. But that's where we originally started in November of 1945.

(K) Now you started with appliances then?

(B) Well what we could get at time, we could get a few oil burns, a few hand irons, and the day we opened up, we sold every oil burner that we had in stock. I think we had around, it was around a dozen oil burners and naturally there wasn't any problem selling them, we didn't have to be salesman at all there was just such a demand. But the sad part about this that whole business that this company we were working with was a scam!

(K) Is that right?

(B) Yeah and they were all defective oil burners and we had to take them all back and we were very fortunate that we didn't have some lawsuits on us because a couple of them actually blew

up in the homes. Not to the point where they injured anybody but they backfired with soot and boy and needless to say our capital is dwindling and I can remember Walt and I on our hands and knees on a weekend, on a little house on Pine Street every time I drive by it I think about it that we washed their walls and scrubbed their rugs and...

(K) Because of the furnace?

(B) Because of the furnace backfiring. We had another one up in Michigamme we had to do the same thing. So that was a beginning of a business enterprise as far as we were concerned, so with a lack of merchandise and this company we couldn't trust any more we dabbled in a little sporting goods. At that time there was a firm in Escanaba called Delta Hardware. They were a large hardware firm and the sales manager, we became pretty good friends and we felt oh quite compassionate because we were trying to get started. So fishing reels at that time were like gold and he would send us some fishing reels and he would send us some .22 shells, items like that and it all helped and that how we got started in sporting goods. We were able to get ahold of some army surplus skis and army surplus snowshoes.

(K) How did those sell?

(B) Oh they were wonderful! They went out the door right away, no they didn't come back. No we had... it was fun and we knew we had to get merchandise so then that how we branched into the phonographic record field at that time. And again there was a firm here in town called The Soo Marquette Hardware, they are out of business now but they handled the Majestic Records and so we put in some Majestic Records. First thing you know Columbia heard about it and Decca and Capital and we were a full pledged record store. We had a large large record department, very large record department. We just kept branching into little departments until we could really get our feet wet you might say in the business world. Trying to find merchandise to sell and naturally moving into a new community, we did not know anybody and we had to get ourselves acquainted with various organizations and individuals. We spent a good deal of time doing that.

(K) So you think despite the problem with the furnaces at the start you had a pretty lucky shot at it?

(B) Oh we were very fortunate yeah and we still made our customers happy and they realize the problem and to this day I still see one or two of their old old costumers still coming in the store.

(K) Is that right?

(B) Yup.

(K) Well that's neat.

(B) Yeah and then they never forget that experience and neither will we, believe me.

(K) What was the range or spectrum of sporting goods like in 45' or 46'?

(B) Well it's not high-tech like it is now my goodness. You had let's just take for example a fishing rod at that time if you didn't have a Bristol nine foot metal telescopic rod you were just not in it. And that's what everybody had, that's what everybody fished with was a level line reel with some nylon line, not the nylon that you have now it was a black braided nylon line. Some split shot sinkers and a box of hooks and away you went. At that time they still had the bamboo fly rods, you know we didn't have graphite or glass or these glorious miracle materials that they have now and days. But its high tech, you can go into archery you go into department that we have now and we have some reflex, recurved bows and that's all we had.

(K) Compound wasn't around

(B) No! They didn't know what a compound was and accessories they didn't know what sights were. We were all instinct shooters.

(K) Me too.

(B) All instinct and I still enjoy that part of archery. Look at our shoe department now.

(K) Oh man.

(B) We got there must be over a hundred different models of shoes we have and before handled Converse, it was white or black.

(K) You know the old canvas high top?

(B) Yup high top or the ox red and if we had a hundred pair at inventory that was a lot. It's just amazing as what has happened to the sporting goods field. My memory goes back to a few people in town who helped us because as I say it at that time they are getting down to the bottom of the barrels as far as our capital was concerned. And an old gentlemen by the name of E.L. Peirce, Ed Piece, E.L. was the president owner of the Union National Bank at that time. And he was very lenient with his loans, we had very little collateral at the time but he had trust in us and we are very fortunate that we met a man like that. We needed some money and it put it in our checking account and naturally it was done in a business like manor but we weren't a number. We were Walt, we were Bob with Ed and E.L. it was not a computer, it makes a difference

(K) More personal.

(B) Very much you walk into the bank and hi Ed, Hi E.L. I think that's Leo over there in the corner. It's different now you walk into the bank and it's a little colder.

(K) So Marquette was pretty receptive to you changing to sporting goods?

(B) Yes at that time there was only one sports shop in and that was Richard's who are still here, very wonderful competitors incidentally. There was a Kelly Hardware which was a large hardware down on South Front Street and they were into sporting goods and ice skates what have you. But actually that was the only stores locally who handled any type of equipment. So we just saw a future there and we just more or less promoted it. Walt and myself we were both athletically inclined when we both got our fields that we enjoyed in life and as I say we joined various organizations and clubs, bowling leagues and what have you to get ourselves known.

(K) So you played a lot of tennis and golf?

(B) I played a lot of tennis, a lot of golf, a lot of basketball when you know I was a youngster. And I still do play a lot of golf and tennis. So as I say Walt was... a at one time Walt was a minor league baseball pitcher, he was very talented so when he came he got himself involved in baseball which would be played here then. And softball, he was a good bowler and a good golfer and first thing you know we were accepted in that part of the community.

(K) How did you meet your wife?

(B) Oh we met at the General Motors Tech we both going there.

(K) Was she working there also?

(B) Well they had at that time they had a secretarial division and she was in utopia because about a thousand male students there was only about fifty female students so that's how I met Ginny was at GMI. And we were married in 1940 so we got a fiftieth coming up in a couple of years.

(K) That great.

(B) Let's see we moved downtown the following spring in 46' and we moved down at 209 South Front Street that's right by the overpass, that railroad over pass we were right below that. Liquor store was on the north of us and there was a plumbing shop on the south of us and we stayed there till about 51' and then we moved up here to our present location in 51' we've been here ever since then. Again my memory goes back the night that we moved... friends that we had made, Jim Souly [Spelled Phonetically], Tommy Knolt [Spelled Phonetically], Dolse Stimt [Spelled Phonetically], and young Tikeman Dickson [Spelled Phonetically], and all these kids and friends came down and they moved our entire inventory from South Front up here on Washington, that night! That was Saturday night and the funniest thing I will never forget when we moved the safe, we put the safe on a little hand track and we pulled right up the center of Front Street and the center of Washington Street at 2:00 in the morning.

(K) 2:00 in the morning?!

(B) Yeah it was really odd. Hurbby Hieghtman [Spelled Phonetically] and Jim Souly and Tommy were pushing that and it was a heavy safe too. And we opened for business Monday

morning, not that we were settled but we opened and it was a good move to move up here at that time, Washington street here that was one block that was the whole center and focus of the business industry here in Marquette as far as retail was concerned. And at that time they had a lot of, a lot of walking traffic and we spent a lot of time on our windows people would window shop and it's a little different now. I mean our business is still good but it's we don't have foot traffic like we used to have.

(K) Yeah.

(B) Christmas time you had to walk in the streets you couldn't even walk on the sidewalk that's how busy it was.

(K) That busy?

(B) Yeah. You wanted to go any place on the Washington you had to walk in the street. It was shoulder to shoulder with people.

(K) Now back then is that as far as the business on Washington went?

(B) It hasn't changed much, over all these years.

(K) Is that right?

(B) Mmhm it's been 100 block on Washington and a one 200 block on South Front but even that had detreated, it's very few retail businesses now on South Front, very few. You know there are very few merchants left I think of Patty's is still here on that side of the street, Washington Shoe Store, and Richard's.

(K) And they were all there at the beginning?

(B) Yeah they are still there otherwise everybody else was new and on our side of the street is ourselves... and that's it. Northern Stationary they were in business but they were down on South Front and then they moved up here in the old Woodworth's building. Now that's all that is here now that were in business when we moved up here.

(K) When did you branch out to the Third Street store?

(B) That was about nine years ago, we opened up that branch because we could see that we needed or Marquette needed athletic type of store in that area close to the university and the high school is up there now and there just seemed to be growth in that area and so we bought the old credit union building and started with that. And then we enlarged, put on the addition six years ago the new addition was a real blessing we certainly needed the room especially the sales room.

(K) Where the shoe department is now?

(B) That's right that whole end where the office is and the workshop and shoe department.

(K) I can't imagine that store not having that!

(B) Well you can see how crowded it is now and with this new addition that we are planning that's going to be around 1500 square feet, two stores and a basement and a first floor. So with 3000 additional square feet, that will help us a lot.

(K) That basement will help a lot for storage.

(B) We are in dire need of storage.

(K) So you still do business a lot with Northern? Was that...?

(B) Well we with Northern directly nationally everything is on bid bases and its very competitive and we bid on everything that they send us and we some bids are returned to us, we win them and others we don't. But we do have quite a few students who stop into the store, as I say we opened it up as an athletic store, there is no guns, ammunition, fishing tackle, archery anything like that up there strictly an athletic store. The old clothing inventory and shoe inventory and in the winter months a large inventory of price equipment and ski equipment.

(K) Was hockey real popular?

(B) Hockey has been popular in Marquette ever since we have been here.

(K) Ever since you got here.

(B) It has not as the scope it is now as far as the junior programs especially.

(K) Yeah.

(B) But I remember when we came here a Thursday night was hockey night at the Palestra the old Palestra and we had seats in the old wooden bleachers and the only thing you were worried about was sticks flying over the rail and booze up above you in the balcony going to spill something on you. That's the only thing you had to worry about.

(K) Where was that?

(B) Right where the football field is now. That was the Palestra and they had an upper room there, that balcony which years ago we used to teach stay lines we used to teach archery flint rounds up there on Sunday afternoons. And that was burnt, they had a fire and that portion of the building was burnt and so they just had the ice arena.

(K) Now you say flint rounds they used flints?

(B) No no at that time flint round was on a stationary target but they put different targets in and stand you back at different lengths.

(K) Oh I see.

(B) And that was fine for when you are only working with about thirty yards and a very narrow area you are working with. So at that time archery was just coming into its own and Bear was just in fact he Bear and York are about the only ones really making any archery equipment to any existent. And we used to drive down, shows you how popular archery was getting, we would drive down to Grayling and right to the factory.

(K) The Bear factory?

(B) And pick up our bows and put them in the back seat of the old Pontiac and drive back up again. Because by the time they'd box them and ship them to us it would be three, four, five days but this way we could go down and overnight and come back. But archery got so popular as of just now but not that technically.

(K) No the bridge wasn't going over street until what... 53'?

(B) The bridge was... we were still going over the bridge. The bridge has been there what twenty some odd years now I don't ever recall taking the ferry over. You know for that purpose many time we took the ferry back and forth years and years ago, I remember that. That was the only time you'd get a chance to sleep. You'd like to get to the ferry.

(K) You'd like to catch a nap.

(B) Yeah you always look for the nap but otherwise over the years at one time we were in the appliance business too you know very heavily.

(K) What did you sell?

(B) Norge when we were on South Front Street and a Norge distributor from Menominee, Van Doblin [Spelled Phonetically] was the firms name approached us and we were a little apprehensive it wasn't a fact we couldn't sell it we were a little apprehensive because its service. And it was just like somebody dropping in from outer space with the name of Royce, was a tremendous applicant serviceman that moved into the area so we got together and worked on a service contract with him and South Front Street had a huge basement and could be entered from an alley not the front. So it was just ideal for you know delivery of this heavy equipment and also bringing in service equipment. So we were in the appliance business for a good many years and when we moved here we maintained a TV and radio and record department. It was in the back for the store here, presently where we have our baseball equipment and golf equipment right now. And the record department was over in the corner here where we could put sleeping bags and all that. So back in the store was TV, radio and records and the sporting goods were moved to the front.

(K) The sporting goods were the far corner?

(B) And we kept that oh that department until 15 years ago that's when Walt retired and when he retired the service man that we had Buster Bonemy [Spelled Phonetically], he retired the next year so again we can see the writing on the wall if you didn't have service then you might just as well get out of it. And we tried to find somebody who we could hire who could take over Buster's responsibility but we tried a couple and they just weren't satisfied so we just sold out that department and the record department. And just increased our inventory in sporting goods.

(K) What determined you guys to name the store Johnson's?

(B) Well see when Walt came up, he came up first and went over to the county courthouse to find out what the procedures were to opening up a business, you don't just open up a business he know you had to buy something a license or.... So he had to fill out the form and so he just put Johnson's Distributing Company that was our original name. And then after we closed out the appliance end of it and what we started with this outfit from Detroit called NAPCO, North America Products Company. Then we went on the road of just Johnson's and we were just Johnson's for many many years, and didn't want to say Johnson's sports shop or Johnson's appliance because we had both so we just called ourselves Johnson's.

(K) So after you sold out your appliances...

(B) Then after the appliances and everything we reregistered again to Johnson's Lopy Sport shop but our technical name is Johnsons Sports Center and Outfit and that's the way we are listed on all of our papers. So that's where the original Johnson's came in was Walt was up here and he had to put something down on that applications so he put Johnson's Distributing Company

(K) And that was his last name?

(B) YupWalt Johnson but you know we e had been partners since the beginning and during our business days and that was in November 1945.

(K) 43 years later.

(B) Yup. And now John manages the Third Street, he is the general manager and Rex downtown here and my older boy Bob who we've missed tremendously, he just did not care for retail. He liked the business, he liked meeting the public but he did not like the long hours. Which that's retail is long hours if you going to make a success of it. So he went back to teaching and now lives in Albuquerque but we miss his, he had a good business head, Bob. And his projections are a were just uncanny and he was he got a tremendous math mind. Many times he would wait on a customers and rings up eight or nine items and he'd already add it up in his head. And that's before you had that little calculator there by the till. And a lot of times the customers would want a receipt because they were a little apprehensive by the amount. So he would write it out and it would come out exactly what he had told them it was. So he had this nack of addition in his mind

that he could add so quickly but he was so good with finances like I say I miss him tremendously because of that.

(K) Is that what he is teaching Albuquerque?

(B) No no no he went back got another degree, he did have a math degree and then he went back and got a kind of a Special ED degree where he is counseling youngsters in the high school with a history major. So he does both he teaches history and he also counselling for the alcoholic dependents and...

(K) Ok.

(B) So I say we miss him tremendously. Yeah we have a good staff of six or seven part time employees, most of them university students and sometimes it hectic trying to get hours straighten out but they usually straighten out themselves. So when I do go away for a couple of months a year I don't worry like I used to, it's kind of nice to be able to do that. You know when you can find the talent.

(K) Yeah.

(B) It's fun as I say its if you don't have a product knowledge you just don't stand in front of that customer it's this is not going into a... I'm not trying to tear down anybody but I am saying. But I am saying it's not like going into a Kmart or ShopKo when you come into an independent store like this these employees should know and if they don't know I want to know why.

(K) The customers expects them to know.

(B) That's right that's why they are coming to that independent store. They want to know if there are eight sleeping bags what is the difference? Just using that as an example and they come on run shoes, walking shoes.

(K) Skis.

(B) And skis and you have to have the proper knowledge to transfer your knowledge to them and sell that product. So that's why we have so many clinic in this store, to see if we can transfer our knowledge over to the kids.

(K) Are your kids well involved in sports growing up as you?

(B) Bob and John?

(K) Bob and John and...

(B) Yeah yeah the girls more than the boys I mean they didn't go to the varsity but being golf and tennis minded so much that all of our kids can play tennis and they can play golf and I would say that they were quite a bit above average when it counts. And their, bob and john were

tremendous basketball players but they just didn't have that height that you have to have. John more aggressive than Bob when it comes to that because he was always getting injured. He was always in the hospital a stitch here and a stitch there. The two girls there wasn't too much competition between the two girls because there is such an age span but there is now. And both are very very good golfers and they just love to golf and beat one another. Julie naturally was a tennis player, I wish that she... I truly wish that she could have gone to a tennis camp when she was younger we could have afforded it or someone could have sponsored her. I feel that she was real pro material but she hits that ball so hard, she hits it harder than a man and her timing is just beautiful. She has just such good grounds to her service but the only time she plays now is maybe three, four times a year when Bob asks her to go out. But the whole family even my wife she was club champion up here three times, four times I can't remember. She was a good golfer, a good bowler.

(K) And in Marquette?

(B) Yeah her names on a couple things four times. Anna has been on the cup a couple times so as I say we have been a close family as far largely possible as we could have been with how many hours that I put in when we got started. I think that's one of the regrets of my life is the two older children Bob and Anna that I didn't have the time to spend with them growing up. The only time I really had was on Sunday afternoons as I did with John and Julie especially Julie because I had a lot more time and she had gone hunting with me and always spent a lot more time together. But I hope they someday realize it.

(K) Anything else you want to add?

(B) Mmm other than I hope the firm can continue as it as in the past and I think it will if management that we have they all have pride in the store and in their knowledge and I am quite sure it's going to be successful for years to come.

(K) Thanks.

(B) You bet.

End of Interview