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Jim Blakemore talks to a well-wisher in 2012 during an exhibition of Ideal Food Stores at the Coronado Museum. Blakemore is returning to Liberal Jan. 18 to sign copies of his new book highlighting the role of his father as a pioneer in the grocery business. L&T photo/Earl Watt

Jim Blakemore shares his father's journey in the grocery business that began in Liberal and grew to become a major corporation

By EARL WATT

• Leader & Times

There was a time when one of the closest community relationships was between a customer and the local grocer.

In the early days of providing groceries to customers, it was the clerk, not the customer, that walked up and down the aisles and filled the order.

Over the years, grocers and customers changed, and Liberal's James Blakemore was one of the innovators who helped transform the industry from the corner store into the supermarket.

His son, also named Jim, has written a book about the experiences and transitions in the grocery business as he grew up watching the transformation. When he was 19, the Blakemore Brothers chain of stores merged with another group and became the cornerstone of the Ideal Food Stores chain.

Blakemore's book, "The Blakemore Brothers Grocery Co. Operators of the Ideal Food Stores" will make its debut in Liberal Jan. 18 with a special book signing with the author at the Coronado Museum.



Blakemore decided to write the book because he has two sons, and he didn't have a good way of splitting the store's photos between them. So, he decided to produce a book that shared the history of their grandfather and his lifelong journey through the grocery business. He also wanted to honor the employees who made the company a success for so long.

Jim's father was one of Liberal's earliest grocers and took over the J.E. George grocery store. Over the years, he developed a chain of stores throughout the High Plains.

"When they started off, they had stores less than 80 square feet," Blakemore said. "They ended

up with stores with 23,000 square feet, from the 1920s to the 1960s when they merged with Allied Supermarkets.”

Blakemore’s distribution system to satellite stores became the model for corporate grocers, He also focused on adding product lines within the store, which required more shelf space and more square feet. The corner grocery store was becoming the supermarket.

All the while, the senior Blakemore worked on better methods to provide his customers with the products they wanted.

“They would use a water can on produce, like watering flowers, and they would sprinkle the lettuce and celery,” Blakemore said. “Dad came up with the idea of putting a sprinkler over the top of it, and it would spray everything. He pretty much invented that. We always had to look at grocery stores when we went out of town and incorporate those things they were doing that were new.”

The shopping experience wasn’t a several-times-per-week chore back then. Instead, shoppers stopped by the store once every week or two, loaded up, and went home.

As a teen-age sacker, Blakemore remembered jockeying for position if a customer with a cute daughter came through, and trying to avoid some customers who only shopped once a month.

“We had one customer who lived southwest of Liberal,” he recalled. “He drove a four-door Ford or Plymouth, and he would take the seats out, drive to town and would fill up with boxes of food, and he would sit on a can to drive back out to the country. We hated to have to do his groceries. It was such a chore.”

Customers developed relationships with the store managers as well as their favorite checker.

“We had one girl at the north store, she was probably 5-1 and feisty as could be,” Blakemore

said. “Everybody loved her. I’ve seen women stand in line where they could go to another stand and check out, but they wanted to wait on Mabel. Back then, the checkers remembered their customers by name.”

Shopping for groceries has changed somewhat.

Families don’t eat as many meals at home, according to Blakemore, and the meals they do eat are prepared in a short amount of time. It is a rarity today for what used to be a daily family event — supper time.

With the cultural changes came changes to the types of products in the store. The canned-goods section shrank while the frozen food section expanded. Even the few feet of pet food grew in into an entire aisle of pet products.

These are some of the observations Blakemore has made more than a half century observing the grocery business.

Still housing a bit of the competitive fire, he is quick to point out that there is not “a Safeway, just the Ideal way.”

Blakemore’s book will be available at 10 a.m. Jan. 18 at the Coronado Museum, and he will be on hand to sign copies. Blakemore has agreed to donate the proceeds of the book sales to the Seward County Heritage Center Building Fund. The public is encouraged to attend the event.

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