Growing up on Beulah’s Main Street

One man’s bird’s eye view

BY KATHY TANDBERG

Editor’s note: Part 1 of a 2-part feature

Growing up on Beulah’s Main Street was an education for young Ben Mulhauzer Jr., who, when he wasn’t at school, was at his father’s full-service gas station, Ben’s Standard Service.

Back in those days, a service station was where the action was, where men gathered for coffee and conversation. “We only lived a block away and I was around six when I would walk over to the station,” Ben Jr. recalled. “I began to pump gas for my Dad when I was around 10.”

Ben’s father, Ben Sr., moved to Beulah at the age of 18 from his parents’ family homestead near Blue Grass. He came to work in the Beulah Mine and was assigned to an area near Zap. Not long after, he met his bride, Belda Sandau, a cook at the Beulah Mine Cookhouse.

The Beulah Mine labor strike of 1922-1923 changed the course of the family, who left the area for work in a Montana mine until 1925 when they returned to Beulah.

Ben Sr. went to work in Beulah for George Slowey, who owned the Farmall tractor dealership. Later J.B. Field bought Slowey out. Ben Sr. worked for Field until 1940, when he bought Field out and built Ben’s Standard Service.

Ben Jr. worked alongside his father, learning the business as he grew into adulthood. When Ben Sr. died suddenly in 1958, Ben Jr. took over the family business and became the mainstay and fixture of Ben’s Standard Service.

By then the family had moved to the house across the street to the west of the station, the home Ben Jr. still owns today.

Now retired, Ben Jr., 78, known as Bennie for many of his years, recalls memories from his bird’s eye view of Main Street both to the east and the west.

From the station’s Main Street location — the south side of Main Street on the corner of Second Avenue West and now part of the Bronson’s Marketplace parking lot — Ben Jr. learned about life in those times, not only in Beulah but also in Mercer County.

Ben Jr. laughed when he said, “People liked to hang around the station and tell stories. Sometimes there would be some words come out of my Dad’s mouth and then he would say, ‘You get out of here and go home.’”

“My Mom would say, ‘I don’t know Bennie how you can sitter sometimes and then those words fly out of your mouth just fine.’”

Ben said farmers from all over the county stopped at the Standard station when they were in town. From his perch on Main Street, Ben Jr. saw Beulah grow from a small town into a booming town more than once.

Even as a boy he noticed how quiet business was during World War II days.

“During the war when gas was rationed, there’d be horses pulling wagons and be saddle horses along with some cars. People could get only so much gas then,” Ben recollected.

After the war, Ben Jr. saw Beulah and area towns boom with housing and families and new schools by the early 1960s.

Ben Jr. said, at one time, there were hardly any grocery stores in Beulah and then there were as many as four operating on Beulah’s Main Street. (Read more details on Beulah businesses in Part 2.)

He recalled days when Ben Mulhauzer Sr., with his two oldest children, Betsinda, left, and Bennie sitting on the Standard bulk delivery truck. Ben Sr. first owned the Standard Oil Bulk Station in Beulah in partnership with J.B. Field before buying him out in 1940, when he built the station.

Ben’s Standard Service, built in 1940 by Ben Mulhauzer Sr., became Ben’s Muffler in 1977. The business stood on its south Main Street location until approximately 2009, when the property became part of the Bronson’s Marketplace expansion project. The building stood in what is now the northwest corner of Bronson’s parking lot.
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By KATHY TANDBERG
Part of a 2-part feature

Retired Beulah businessman Ben Mulhauser Jr., 78, related lifetime on Beulah’s Main Street.

It began for Ben Jr. as a boy of 6 when he walked the block from his home to spend the day with his father, Ben Mulhauser Sr., at the family business, Ben’s Standard Service.

That block walk became a short walk across the street in 1957 when the Mulhauser family moved to the house just to the west of the gas station that Ben Jr. still owns.

“I liked working with Dad at the station. We had a good business going,” Ben Jr. recollected.

The pleasure of being in business with his father was short lived when, in 1958, Ben Sr. died suddenly. Ben Jr. became the 23-year-old proprietor of the service station, with big shoes to fill as sole supporter of his family, his mother Hulda and younger sisters Bet-sinda and Margareta.

“It was different without my Dad around, but we made it work,” Ben Jr. said.

Ben’s Standard Service continued to be a local gathering place for the men around town, who stopped in daily for coffee and local chatter. And, to watch the daily happenings on Beulah’s main street.

Sitting in his home at School House Apartments where he resides today, Ben Jr. took a walk down the street of his memories.

“But now these are my memories and I don’t want anyone getting mad if they remember it differently,” Ben Jr. said with a laugh.

He could see four grocery stores downtown at one time:

Sailer’s Red Owl, located on the east end of Main, where the current Laundromat is.

Mike’s Grocery, owned by Mike Heid, began in 1939 and was near the post office. The business later became Mike’s Jack & Jill. In 1980, George and Selma Kopp became proprietors and it became Kopp’s Jack & Jill.

Kopp later sold to Roger and Ruth Smith, who named it Smith’s Jack & Jill. This store later moved up the hill north to Seventh Street Northwest, now the location of Family Dollar.

RCU Groceries and Dry Goods Store, owned by Albert Wolf, was located on the corner of Main Street and Central Avenue South. This was later the location of the former Ben Franklin store, now the location of Heart of the Valley.

Daniel Huber owned and operated several businesses on Beulah’s Main Street, including the one he built in 1947, which was advertised as the “largest Super Market in Mercer County” at that time. This was the location of the current Country Kettle.

Huber had frozen fish in a box outside on the sidewalk, weekly premiums and dog food, boots, shoes, beer, Bohemian sausage, 500 frozen food lockers in the basement and “modern” grocery carts. Due to ill health, Huber sold out to Hanewald and Benz from Hazen.

Before these days there was the dry goods store that offered everything a person could want, built by Fred Flemmer. It was called the Country Store. Flemmer also operated a cream station with groceries.

In the 1960s, Ben Jr. said there was a point where there was no actual grocery store in town.

“Fred (Galloway) said ‘we have to get a grocery store in town’ and put one in next to where Ziman’s Jewelry is located. Then later he built where the NAPA store is now located,” Ben Jr. said.

Galloway’s first building, according to Ben Jr., was the old EGA store owned by Mrs. Sovich. It became Galloway Super Valu.

Galloway later sold out to Bronson’s Super Valu, owned by Rich and Karen Bronson.

The Super Valu store is now Bronson’s Marketplace, owned by the Bronson’s daughter, Kim, and her husband, Kelly.

...and we had the old shoe shop, the Creamery, in fact, two creameries.

Ludwig’s Creamery was along the railroad tracks behind where Ben’s Insurance is. Arrow Creamery was next to Weber’s Furniture,” Ben Jr. said.

Ben Jr. said there were also several gas stations in Beulah. There was a Texaco station on the corner where Job Service is currently located. Albert Froeschle had a station that was built by Fred Flemmer. That was located across Main Street to the south from Flemmer’s Bank of Beulah (the current First Security Bank-West).

“Fred (Flemmer) built the service station. It was a Standard and then it was Phillips 66. He sold it to Sper and then Albert rented it from Henry Sper Jr.,” he said.

As he continued his look down Main Street, Ben Jr. pointed out that the old post office was located in the location of the current post office parking lot.

As he looked back on his working days, he recalled more about the bowling alley that was in the basement of Weber’s Furniture Store that was located on the corner of First Street and Central Avenue North, across from the current City Hall.

“Boy were those lanes crooked. Oh, man, the machines were manual, not electric, and I was a pin setter,” he shared.

Some of those people would get impatient and as soon as a ball was rolled, those pins set the ball would start coming at me and I’d have to jump out of the way,” he said.

That bowling alley closed sometime around 1958 or 1959, he said. But next to the Main Bar was another bowling alley. At that time the Main Bar location was that of Corner Hardware, owned by Fred Flemmer, building that houses Town and Country Barber today.

“There was a café in there, too,” added Ben Jr.’s friend, Aggie Fitch. “I worked at the café there. It was a nice place.”

In 1955 Henry Spier Jr. built a new bowling lanes, which he sold in 1974 to Ervin Mohl.

Ben Jr. said where the Geissman Pawn Shop was located there was a pool hall and coffee shop operated by Gordon Heit. In 1962 it became Fischer’s City Café, owned by Les and DeLora Fischer.

Strolling in the middle of Main Street, Ben Jr. remembered that in the mid-1940s in the current Do It Best Hardware location there was a barber shop with living quarters behind it for owners George and Martha Kuch.

In 1948, the Kuchs bought the old variety store in the current Country Kettle location. Shortly after purchase, the Kuchs relocated the variety store into the barber shop location. Mrs. Art Tabert bought the store in 1952 or 1953.

Ben Jr. said there was also an old blacksmith shop where the welding shop is located, just across from Downtown Conoco to the south.

He said there were many implement dealers and also automobile dealers in Beulah many years ago. In fact, he was a child when Liebelt’s Garage at the corner of Main Street and East Second Avenue was built. That building is the white stucco building that is in poor condition but possibly undergoing renovation at this time.

“I hope they can save it. That’s a historic building and should be saved if they can make it safe,” Ben Jr. said.

Ben’s Standard Service became Ben’s Mulller’s in the 1977. He can’t say exactly when. He thinks it was sometime about six years ago that he sold the building and lot to Bronson’s Super Valu. The building was eventually torn down and is now part of the market’s parking lot.

Zip to Zap comes to Beulah

One of the most exciting times for Ben Jr. was the historic 1969 Zip to Zap. He remembers that Sunday early morning well.

“Everything burst loose that Saturday and when the National Guard chased everyone out of Zap they came to Beulah. They took me up and said you better go down and check the station. I couldn’t even get the door to the station unlocked and they were beating on it. They wanted to use my little bathroom and they were buying everything they could get, sell, gas, pop and candy,” Ben Jr. said.

Those were the days when gas stations were the cash register and the people pumped their own gas.

“You couldn’t keep track of who came in to pay or not. Mother came over and couldn’t see me and thought that I started to hit her, then she saw me she asked what she could do and I said, ‘sell everything you want! I never saw so many people!’” he said.

Ben Jr. said while people were saying terrible things about the Zip to Zap part, he had nothing bad to say about them.

“The only ones who came into Beulah didn’t wreck nothing here,” he said.

Ben Jr. said his trip down Beulah’s Main Street has been a trip through his childhood. Memories of a lifetime, not soon forgotten.

A 1931 view of Beulah’s Main Street looking west.