

Smitty's stays on top in a constantly changing industry

By LAURA MACDUFF, POST NEWS

"It started as a grocery and hardware store," says Lani Lorenz, store marketing manager at Smitty's Furniture, seated at her desk at the Smitty's store in Hanover - a large, spacious showroom, filled with beautiful styles and colours of furniture. "This was back in 1949."

Sixty years later, Smitty's Furniture still stands as one of Hanover's most prosperous businesses.

"It's exciting," says Lorenz. "We hope to go another 60 years."

Smitty's original location was built by Elmer and Lloyd Schmidt, alongside their father Edward Schmidt, where the Stork Club is now located. Back then, the store sold meats, groceries, hardware and large appliances. The company expanded in 1951, offering customers the sale of pianos, organs and home furnishings. In 1955, the store expanded to include drapery, broadloom and televisions. In 1963, a new plaza and showroom location was built by the Schmidt family at the south end of Hanover. Their brother, Gordon Schmidt, joined the company to include a sewing machine business.

When Smitty's first opened, it was surrounded by many of Canada's leading furniture manufacturers, such as Durham Furniture, Heirloom, Krug Bros., Pepler's, Knechtel's, Andrew Malcolm and Bogdon and Gross, just to name a few.

Smitty's long-time guarantee of providing quality furniture at a great price brought customers from all over Southern Ontario, especially Hamilton, Toronto, Kitchener and London.

In 1974, Smitty's expanded the warehouse facilities to a 25,000-foot location across the street from the showroom in Hanover.

Looking towards future growth was always the Smitty's way. By the early 1980s customers were not as willing to drive the distance to Hanover, so Smitty's opened a new 44,000 sq. ft. showroom in Cambridge in 1985.

Soon after, in 1990, Smitty's opened another store in Barrie then another in Pickering in 1995.

The furniture business was booming, and so was Smitty's. However, by the early 2000s with changes in the global markets, consumers wanted cheaper priced furniture. Smitty's had to change the type of furniture they sold and a decision was made to close the Barrie and Pickering locations.

"In the past few years we had to get back to basics and focus on what we do best," says Lorenz.

But this wasn't the only change for Smitty's.

In 2008, Lloyd Schmidt, founder of Smitty's, passed away suddenly during routine heart surgery.

"My father is greatly missed. He never planned on retiring," says Lorenz. "Dad taught us to think to the future and not be afraid to take risks."

Schmidt was known for his hard work ethic and positive attitude.

"He was a driven man," says Lorenz. "He was always looking at showrooms in other parts of Canada and the U. S. to get ideas to improve Smitty's."

Schmidt prided himself in the community, and he served on the Hanover Chamber of Commerce in the 1960s and as chairman of the building committee for the new Hanover and District Hospital in the 1970s. He was also actively involved in theatre productions for the Little Theatre in Hanover, and the Grey Bruce Singers.

Last January, Schmidt was honoured for a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Canadian Home Furnishings Awards in Toronto.

Smitty's has dedicated, professional, long-term staff, many who have been with the company for over 25 years.

"I see the furniture industry changing again. People are starting to realize that when they buy furniture that's made in China, it means that someone they know may have their job threatened," says Lorenz. "People are starting to ask for and purchase Canadian-made furniture again. And we are happy to offer Canadian-made products by Durham Furniture, Superstyle, Brentwood and Future, to name a few."

Article ID# 1558727

