

This mom-and-pop mart still stands, thriving under new local operators

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Every life has a story to tell. And, it would seem, so does every corner store.

J & R's Foodland, billed as the last "mom and pop" store in Los Altos, has a rich, oral history that dates back to 1940. The store reopened last month under new operators after a four-month closing.

Gathered and compiled by Don McDonald, a member of the Los Altos Historical Commission, the history of this small store begins with George and Eleanor Munding.

The Mundingers built the store along the frontage of their property on Santa Rita Avenue, naming it the Santa Rita Food Shop. According to McDonald, "George's main business at the time was trucking produce into San Francisco. Eleanor clerked in the store and was (the store's) bookkeeper."

George also helped by traveling to San Jose to purchase meat for the store, which would require an entire day, McDonald said. "When the meat got too old to sell, (George) would give it to (neighbors) for their pets," he said.

From 1951 to 1955, the store was owned by Henry and Hildegard Kinder and named Kinder's Grocery Store. "(Hildegard) worked in the store all day, and (Henry) took over after finishing his days at the Emporium ... the store (was) very popular with the youngsters in the neighborhood," McDonald said.

In the late 1960s, the store was purchased by Randy Wing, who "spruced it up as Foodland," McDonald said. Wing then sold it to his father, Harlan Wing. "Harlan established a close rapport with the children at Santa Rita School," McDonald said, "he was very touched when, during his final illness, the sixth grade class there (sent) him get-well wishes and drawings."

Following Harlan's death, an unknown employee of the Wings' bought the store and operated it until the present owner, John Chen, purchased it in 1988. Chen, who is a real estate developer in Hong Kong, has leased the store to a variety of tenants.

In 1994, the store was leased to Hong Qi Sun. "Her husband, a chemist, suggested the name Adamant, because the contours of the old building reminded him of the molecular structure of the substance Adamantane," McDonald said.

Jesse and Renee Cheng leased the store last month, after it had remained closed for over four months. When they walked in for the first time, Jesse Cheng said, the store was "dark and crowded and filled with spider webs."

But if you walk in now, you would never know. The Chengs have transformed the store into a bright, airy neighborhood shop.

Cheng said he would like J & R's Foodland "to serve the convenience grocery needs of the local neighborhood, especially those within walking distance." He said that the products they sell are specifically geared to quick grocery needs and items requested by customers.

According to McDonald, when Dan Burden, a community planning consultant, saw the store during a visit to Los Altos last year, he "expressed delight that Los Altos had retained this lovely example of what helps make a community livable."

And it's what gives Los Altos its own story to tell.

J & R's Foodland is located at 994 Los Altos Ave. and is open from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., Monday through Friday; 10 a.m. to 8 p.m., Saturday and Sunday.