

Chapter 3

Kids to the Rescue

In Chapter One, you were introduced to the family of N.S. & Rose Dispensa. As you will recall, they had nine children. Those children were born in two clusters, three boys and three girls in the first thirteen years, then, after a gap of 10 years, they had another girl and two boys.

The first involvement of the kids was in 1926 when John was 14 years old. He had seen a banana peddler going up and down the street yelling “BANANOS”. John noticed that the peddler was going from block to block, and didn’t make a sale. John, as young as he was, realized that people weren’t going to leave their homes and come all the way down to the street, just to buy a couple of bananas. But, if you brought the fruit to them, they would probably buy it.

Fruit was a luxury in those days. Sometimes young children would get an apple or banana as a birthday or Christmas gift. Money was tight, and toys as we know them today didn’t even exist.

So, John asked his Dad (N.S.) to go to the fruit market and buy him a case of oranges. N. S. said he didn’t have time to waste buying oranges at the market, and told him to ask his Uncle John who worked close to the market.

That first week, Uncle John bought a case of oranges for 10¢ a dozen. John set out selling the oranges door to door at 4 for a nickel, or at 15¢ a dozen. He sold out in one day and made \$1.20 profit on his first day of business. His fruit peddling business grew by leaps and bounds, ordering more and more fruit, until Uncle John got tired of hauling fruit for him.

What does this have to do with the carnival business? Well, John started the fruit peddling business in 1926. At the time, the carnival business was 7 years old. The carnivals only operated from very late April to early September. That left almost seven months of the year without any income.

That’s when John started to pitch his fruit peddling business to N.S.. He pointed out that he was bringing home money each day on just the small business he was running. Why not do it on a larger scale.

N.S. agreed that it would be a good winter business, so they bought a used truck with an enclosed body, and all four of them, N.S., Joe, John and Paul worked in the fruit peddling business.

The first route they established was near 79th & Ashland (Chicago). They worked the houses in the daytime because families lived there and mothers were home with the kids. Then in the evening they called on the apartment buildings because that’s where the single people or working couples lived. They weren’t home in the daytime. Calling on apartment buildings was much more difficult than calling on the houses, because they would climb three flights of stairs only to find that the customer wanted one apple, or two bananas.

The peddling business grew until they had three separate routes, one near 79th

& Ashland, and two in Blue Island. They soon realized that the Blue Island routes were out grossing 79th Street, so it was abandoned and they opened a third route in Blue Island.

So, with the peddling income in the winter, and the carnival income in the summer, they were able to keep body and soul together.

In those days, work came first, education, and everything else came last. None of the three finished grade school, but did learn to read and write. All, that is except John. John was severely dyslexic, and because dyslexia wasn't understood in those days, and in spite of all their efforts, he never did learn to read or write. But, as is usually the case, he was a mechanical genius, designing and building things that revolutionized the carnival industry. But, we're getting ahead of ourselves here, we'll get to that later.

For the next few years they teamed up with other ride owners in the city and while any one of them didn't have enough rides to operate a carnival by themselves, they would have enough by pooling their resources.

During those years the family moved from 23rd & Wentworth (Chicago) to 56th & Albany (also in Chicago). The house on Wentworth was near Chinatown, and the house on Albany was on the Southwest side of the city. Both neighborhoods were good, but there was more room for the growing family and carnival equipment on Albany.

It was the first three boys Joe (1908-2006), John (1912 - 1994) and Paul (1914 - 2003) that took the business from one Ferris Wheel to a carnival company that ran 4 separate carnivals each week for 20 weeks each summer. That's 80 carnivals each season. Each unit was called a "set" of rides, and each set had its own route.

Wait a minute? There are three brothers, and four sets of rides, how did that work. Seeing that the next brother (Anthony) was still in school, that job was given to the eldest grandson, Richard Doria. Richard had just finished four years in the Marine Corps.

But first, we should talk about the kind of carnivals they operated.

There are two kinds of carnivals, the "traveling" carnival, and what's called a "40 miler". A traveling carnival has a route like described in Chapter Two; starting at one point, traveling a route, and returning to the original point at a time in the future. A true traveling carnival has a route that goes year round, not getting back to the starting point for one full year. So, the St. Louis to Chicago route was a hybrid, not really a traveling carnival in the true sense of the word.

A "40 miler", on the other hand, is a carnival with a home base, and doesn't travel more than 40 miles from that base. They come back to the base each night so the crew can return to their homes, sleep in their own beds, and eat their mother's (wife's) home cooking. Dispensa's was a 40 miler.

When N.S. bought that first Ferris Wheel, Joe was 11, John was 7, and Paul was 5. But, like every family business, the kids went to work early, helping out when and where they could. In the early years, during the Circus, St. Louis, and Michigan era, the boys were too young, but when N.S. hooked up with the other ride owners in Illinois and became a 40 miler, the kids began to help out.

The year was 1925, and the eldest son, Joe, was 17, John was 13 and Paul was 11. There would ultimately be 5 boys in the family, but the two youngest Anthony and Nicholas weren't even born yet.

The boys, like all young people, were full of ambition. Soon they began to pester N.S. to expand. They wanted to buy more rides. He objected saying that they had all to do to handle the Ferris Wheel, but they insisted that it would pay to hire a few people to help them, rather than struggle along with just one ride.

They didn't have any money, so they began buying rides on time. They religiously made the payments each month, and developed a good reputation among the carnival ride manufacturers. Again their timing was perfect, because a few years later the Country was paralyzed by the great depression.

The depression was a good time for most carnival operators, because while a man couldn't afford to take his kids on vacation, or eat in fancy restaurants, he always had a nickel or two in his pocket to ride on a carnival ride.

In the meantime, carnival operators that didn't plan ahead, or were poor businessmen, were unable to stay afloat, and began to lose their rides for lack of payment. This proved an advantage to the family because they had developed a good reputation among the ride manufacturers. When a ride was repossessed the ride manufactures called the Dispensa family and offer it to them first because they knew that eventually they would be paid.

The terms were simple, "Take it and pay me what you can when you can". They bought many rides on that basis, and made full payment on every one of them.