

# Chapter 6

## TALL OAKS FROM LITTLE ACORNS GROW.

JOHN BARTLETT (1820–1905)

How does one go about building a retail empire? For the Dispensa Family it was born out of necessity. The carnival merchandise business began in 1948, and grew each year. Then in 1951 we wanted to find a way to clear current inventory from the warehouse to make room for the new goods that would arrive in the spring. At the time we owned a building in Hinsdale, a short walk from the downtown business district. In those days, all the retail was located in one area, usually the main street of the town. Our building was a couple of blocks away, and asking people to go out of their way to buy goods was unheard-of because all the shopping was done in the “business district”. But, we decided to give it a try anyway.

We ran some newspaper ads, and even advertised on radio. In an attempt to lure people from the main business district we did one other thing, we introduced discount pricing on name brand goods. Then the rumors started, “Oh no! There must be something wrong with their stuff. Perhaps it’s damaged, perhaps its seconds (imperfects), or maybe it’s even hot.”

Who spread these rumors we’ll never know, but it was probably the retailers in the downtown area, because our customers were going to them and saying they saw the same thing at Dispensa’s for 30% less than the downtown retailer was selling it for.

The merchandise business was just getting off the ground when N.S. retired, and Anthony and Nick Jr. left the business. So necessity caused the brothers to move the merchandise business to their other location (Route 83 and Butterfield Rd. Oakbrook Terrace, IL) in 1953.

Each year, as soon as the carnival season was over, we cleared a portion of the merchandise warehouse and built temporary shelving to display the goods. It surprised us to see that most of the customers we had in Hinsdale followed us to the new location.

This went on for a few years, until one day a lady said, “I come all the way out her for your fantastic prices, why don’t you carry toys so I can do all my shopping at one time.” That was the beginning of Dispensa’s Castle of Toys.

John and his wife Prudy were doing the buying in those days because Nick was still in school. Thinking that price was what brought the people to our store, they began with inexpensive, mostly imported, toys. Friction cars, tops, dolls etc., all low priced goods. We sold, and each year we purchased more, until the year that the big “toxic paint” scare hit the country. We were sitting with a warehouse full of toys that were unsalable.

That settled it, no more “Japanese” toys. From then on it was strictly Ameri-

can. Armed with our outstanding credit rating, and little more, John and Prudy went to New York for the International Toy Fair, and began to purchase from the major toy companies of the day, Mattel, Ideal, Hasbro, Lionel, American Flyer, Playschool etc.

When these lines were introduced that Christmas, business skyrocketed. No one sold name brand toys at a discount. And the discount was on everything, not just a few loss leaders. Soon, the entire merchandise warehouse was devoted to sales, and the inventory had to be warehoused in another building.

Then, one day a survey crew came onto the property, and informed us that they were surveying for an interchange that would bring Route 83 over Roosevelt and Butterfield Roads. That interchange would require that 50% of our property, and all the buildings would be taken by the State. Fortunately, we purchased twenty-five acres in the early 50's, and the remaining twelve and one-half acres would be enough for what we had planned for the property.

It would take many years for the road construction to be completed, but the family began to plan for the future immediately with discussions of what the next toy store would look like. Joe said that it should look like a castle, but what he had in mind was more a fort than a castle. John on the other hand said, "That's not a toy castle, I'll show you a toy castle". So he sketched it out on a piece of paper, and after some discussion and a few changes, he took his drawings to Otto Nerad, a young architect in Clarendon Hills.

John didn't hear from Otto for several months, so he gave him a call. Otto said, "You were serious about that?" John assured him he was, and Otto went to work.

The Castle of Toys opened in 1967 with the largest advertising campaign ever launched for a store devoted exclusively to toys. We had been advertising on the small local radio stations in the area, but now we were moving into the big time, advertising on WGN, WMAQ and WLS to mention a few. The radio stations were happy to take our money, but said they didn't think we could sell toys on radio; toys required a visual medium such as television.

Our idea wasn't to sell the toys on radio, our idea was to tell Mom where she could buy the toys that the kids saw advertised on television. And that's exactly what we did.

In addition to the radio campaigns, we ran "double trucks" in all the local newspapers and the suburban section of the Chicago Tribune. A double truck is two full page ads back to back, usually in the center of the newspaper.

In the first year of operation, the Castle doubled the income of the previous year.

The jump from radio to television was a small one. Because, unlike the local radio stations, the major stations "forced" us to hire an ad agency, because if you had an ad agency, the cost of the ads were less. Another way of looking at it is that the radio station paid the ad agency. The reason for this was simple, they wanted only quality ads run on their stations.

Once we had an ad agency, they were able to help us with the production of both the radio and television commercials. Many people today still know the

words for the Castle and Kiddie Kingdom commercials. You can hear and see the commercials elsewhere in this web site.

When the Castle opened, it was the largest free-standing toy store in the world. Later as the idea caught on, the other toy giants like Toys R. Us and Child World came into the picture. Child World even went so far as to copy the Castle's design, using turrets on their stores.

Another factor in our success was that we purchased our toys directly from the manufacturer while the local toy stores were purchasing from a wholesaler because they couldn't purchase in the volume we did. The Castle had 40,000 square feet of warehouse space as well as 20,000 square feet of sales area. The entire Castle was 80,000 square feet.

Later, most of the remaining 20,000 square feet was also converted to retail space, when we opened the Royal Nursery. The Royal Nursery sold baby furniture.

The buying responsibility was spread between John's two sons, Nick and John Jr. Nick purchased the toys, and John Jr. purchased all the hobby items; trains, road race, video games, crafts etc.

The two also had other responsibilities. Nick handled the marketing for the Castle and Kiddie Kingdom, and John Jr. was responsible for the maintenance of the Kiddie Kingdom equipment, and its erection and dismantling in the Park each season.

The Castle of Toys was flying high. Business was great, our radio and TV advertising reached seven states, we were now in the mail order business and even had a wholesale division. We were reaching out to factories and labor unions to supply gifts for their Christmas parties and were very successful at it. John's wife Prudy made appointments with these buyers, and helped them select the toys that fit their budget and the various age groups they were buying for.