

Bob's Produce

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as a teen for demonstrating skill in entrepreneurship. He got his start in produce sales in his pre-teen years by going door-to-door and selling vegetables that had grown in his parents' garden, which he helped to tend.

Bob worked for different companies including Green Giant Co. before opening his own produce stand on East River Road while in his early 20s.

Soon after the move to Osborne and University 10 years later, came the addition of deli, meat, bakery and grocery departments. A major store expansion in 1991 meant growth for all departments. The deli area, salad bar and sandwich bar continue to be top attractions for area workers and residents during the weekday lunch hour.

A second Bob's Produce Ranch opened in Otsego, Minn., last June.

The company could not yet qualify as a major chain, however. Bob's Produce Ranch, even now with two locations, is still a small enough entity where it can access the highest-quality fruits and vegetables available to be offered for sale in the stores.

Mike Schroer explained that a produce buyer working for a major grocery chain might go to a fruit supplier and ask for a certain number of truckloads of strawberries. A buyer for an

entity such as Bob's Produce Ranch, on the other hand, he said, can go to a supplier and point to a certain pallet or case of fruit. "We can be more particular and more choosy about the product we get," Mike Schroer said. "They (larger chains) may have the advantage of buying better volume. We have the advantage of buying better quality."

The Fridley store is known for being small-town in nature so that on only a second or third visit, patrons may expect to be addressed by name by at least one worker.

"We know there's a huge demand for that kind of service," Mike Schroer said. "Obviously, we wouldn't be in business if there wasn't."

Mike's cousin Dick Schroer says that they also aim to communicate with patrons in other ways that may not be common everywhere.

For instance, in the past two months, Dick said, there has been a worldwide banana shortage due to unfavorable weather in areas where those fruits have been populous. The cost of bananas has grown to the business, and that increase has been reflected in the price presented to customers. In general, and at some stores, many shoppers of today may just see higher prices for all goods and think that it can all be attributed to higher fuel prices. But the people at Bob's Produce Ranch produced and posted a hand-drawn sign to tell their customers about the general shortage of bananas. "There

are other factors (affecting prices) than just fuel prices," Dick Schroer said. "We try to keep people aware of that."

Community support

Planners of community block parties in Fridley and other cities on the first Tuesday this August will be hoping for favorable weather in the state of Colorado this summer, as it will mean they can expect a crate of great peaches compliments of Bob's Produce. Bob Schroer started a tradition several years ago where he offered one crate of Colorado peaches to each National Night Out block party registered with the

Fridley Police Department. In the first few years, store employees delivered the crates to the individual blocks. But soon, successful promotion of National Night Out in Fridley (perhaps combined with some great juicy peaches) built the city's number of registered block parties to surpass 100. Now, each block party host to register with the Fridley PD receives a coupon enabling them to pick up their own complimentary crate of peaches at their convenience. The store has also offered the peaches for block parties in Spring Lake Park and Coon Rapids, and the Otsego store has followed that tradition in its community.

A president of the Fridley Chamber of Commerce in the early 1970s, Bob Schroer also started traditions of community support by giving toward youth

athletic programs and funding scholarships for area high school students. From 1998 into the spring of 2000, Bob helped lead a team of volunteers in repainting each of the city of Fridley's 1,200 fire hydrants (he had a direct hand in repainting roughly two-thirds of them).

Bob accepted an honor and induction into the Fridley Hall of Fame in November 2005.

"He was a mentor to just about everybody," said Mike Schroer of his father. "He was a father figure to a lot of people."

"He had a personality, that all customers came in and felt they knew him as a friend," said Bob's nephew Dick.

The business' remaining partners still are receiving at least two calls daily from patrons and friends expressing sympathy for their loss.

Some patrons have seemed to express concern that the store will begin to lose its charm. Cousins Mike and Dick Schroer, their business partner Tom Freund and the rest of the Bob's Produce Ranch staff are committed to doing everything to ensure that the personal atmosphere will remain at the store.

"The store feels different because he's not here," Mike Schroer acknowledged, speaking of his father, "but nothing's going to change here."

And they will honor Bob and the long-time customers by continuing to use his image in the weekly ads. Mike noted: "People recognize him as a symbol of the store."

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