

All in the family

BY ERIN BOLAND
AND LIBBY PETERSON

These three hometown staples mean business.

Imagine Indiana in the years after it becomes a state in 1816. New towns and cities appear and grow. From Jasper to Starlight to Brownstown, families like the Sturms, the Hubers and the Summerses move in to open up shop. At first, they only wanted to provide for their families. They never imagined that their dream might last more than a century.

Today, the average lifespan of a family venture is 24 years, and only three percent of existing family businesses are owned by a fourth generation or later. Increasingly, the odds are stacked against businesses lasting past the founders.

Bill Whorral, author of "Goodbye, Mom and Pop: Independent Businesses in Southern Indiana," says he was surprised to find so many upbeat store-owners, despite the presence of big-box stores. "This is a kind of Hoosier attitude that says, 'Things aren't as bad as they seem.'" He didn't hear the token phrases like "Have a nice day!" or "Thank you for shopping at" in family businesses. People were more personable and real. One store-owner told Whorral that he never called the police when people shoplifted. "If they can live with it," he told him, "I guess I can."

These stores were known to be more reliable because back in the day, Whorral says, there was a certain attitude about fairness. The owners and customers knew each other. Owners cared about people coming back. "Tell a big-box store clerk you won't come back and see if they look concerned," Whorral says.

Today, reputation is everything. If your store becomes a town staple, it won't budge easily. As Bernie Messmer of Jasper's L.H. Sturm Hardware says: "Success depends on the community." 812 is here to talk about a few family stores whose communities have supported them: a small yet stubborn hardware store, a medium-sized spice store with global girth, and a large, ever-growing orchard and winery.

What we found to be true is that no matter the size, the "Hoosier attitude" prevails in Southern Indiana.



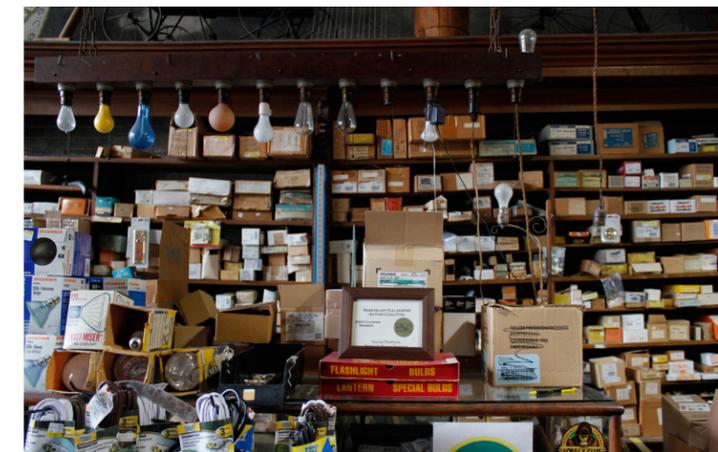
A 1912 photo of three unnamed customers hangs in the store's entryway. Compared to nearly 120 years ago, Sturm Hardware looks virtually the same. /Photos by Libby Peterson



Once a dance hall, Huber's Orchard and Winery's hayloft in Starlight now gives guests a taste of their newest drinks.



One of the many artifacts displayed in Marion Kay's Brownstown store is a photo taken of Marion "Bill" Summers shaking hands with Clyde Fosters after buying out his company, Foster Brothers Company.



Bernie and Sharon Messmer at Sturm's Hardware in Jasper keep small items organized in boxes lined up on the same shelves Louie Sturm built back in 1895.

“There’s a guy up north who claims to have the oldest hardware store in the state. He doesn’t.” - Bernie Messmer

Name: L.H. Sturm Hardware
Opened: 1895
Current generation: 3rd

A staple on Jasper’s downtown square, L.H. Sturm Hardware, gets its name from its founder, Louie Sturm, who opened the store in 1895. Today, the hardware store battles its arch-enemies: the Internet and big box stores.

“There’s a guy up north who claims to have the oldest hardware store in the state,” says Bernie Messmer. “He doesn’t.”

Bernie, 74, co-owns Sturm Hardware with his wife, Sharon, 72, the granddaughter of Louie Sturm, who opened up shop more than a century ago and set up, among other store features, the now-sagging plank boards still used as shelves. Compared to the 1912 sepia-toned picture that hangs in the store’s entryway, Sturm Hardware looks virtually untouched.

Now a part of the National Registry of Historic Places, the store is most popular for its kitchenware, specifically the cast-iron cooking ware and washboards. Sturm’s home beer- and wine-making section has also been a hit, which Bernie credits for the store’s continued survival. “I think it’s kept us going.”

Their biggest enemies are the big-box stores and the Internet, but they’ve survived so far, Bernie and Sharon say, because their customers don’t like waiting for things to ship. Plus, the pair are personable, a skill Bernie says he picked up from Sharon’s uncle Hugo, the second-generation Sturm who owned the store with her aunt Elsie and father, Carl.

“People still come in today and talk about how great Hugo was,” Bernie says. Before taking over fulltime, Bernie helped Hugo with the store every Saturday. Whenever Bernie walked in, Hugo would heave a sigh of relief and hurry out, saying, “Boy, I’m glad you’re here. I’m heading to the tavern for a quick drink,” Bernie recalls with a laugh.

Before Sharon and Bernie knew they would take over the shop, the store’s fate came into question when Elsie became sick. Sharon’s father had died, and neither Hugo nor Elsie, who lived together all their lives, had children. Hugo asked Sharon and Bernie if they would take over the store. When they said yes, Bernie says, Hugo rushed down to the hospital to tell Elsie. “It put her at ease.”

Sharon left her job to run the store when Hugo had a stroke in 1988, and Bernie later joined her full-time. The hardest part was learning where everything was, Sharon says. In fact, the store is so packed with stuff that they’re still learning today. “And if Bernie decides to move something, I’ll have no idea where it is,” she says. “Everything’s got its proper place. I could point to where things are in my sleep.”

They have a son, Jason, 35, who’s decided to go into horticulture, but “he was raised in the store,” Bernie says. When Jason was in the 4th grade, his parents had a conference with his math teacher who told them, “I can’t figure it out, but Jason is way above and beyond the other children at counting cash.”

Though the store may appear untouched, there have been a few changes since Louie’s time: They’ve added a cash register



Among the largely untouched stacks of paperwork and catalogs, Sharon finds a book signed by her uncle, father and grandfather, dated January 28, 1921. /Photo by Libby Peterson

that charges credit cards, and they now keep their inventory in a computer that only Bernie uses. “I don’t do the computer,” Sharon says, pointing to the flickering blue screen on their pre-Internet, 1990s-model monitor.

Yellowed books and catalogs are piled against the wall in a pigeonhole cabinet behind her. They’re supposed to sort through them, Sharon admits, but they haven’t gotten around to it yet—the last time they de-cluttered, they just threw stuff out the window.

Out of curiosity, she turns around and leafs through a stack. “Bernie, can we get rid of these Reader’s Digests?” But Bernie is occupied with a customer. She sets them down and picks up a book about explosives. The store used to sell dynamite, Sharon explains, as she finds a 1944 vendor’s explosive license.

Sharon turns her attention to some books and pulls one out at random called “Indiana Farm Laws” by William K. Williams. She opens the cover and sees a note on the first page, written in pencil: “L.H. Sturm Hdwe. Co., Jasper Ind. June 8/10.” She flips open the cover of another book to find the handwritten date Jan. 28, 1921, and is surprised to see three names below it: Hugo M. Sturm, Carl J. Sturm and Louis H. Sturm.

Keeping Sturm Hardware alive isn’t exactly what either of them envisioned for post-retirement life. But just as Sharon and Bernie have kept the old store going, Sturm has done the same for them.

“We don’t mope around or go to the senior citizen center playing cards all day,” Bernie says.

People have asked them about buying the store, but Bernie has doubts of that likelihood. “I don’t think they can make a living here anymore,” he says.

Sharon has few words regarding the store’s uncertain future: “I don’t like to think about it.”

She had suggested to Bernie that Sturm Hardware might have done better business in a shopping center, but Bernie remains loyal to Jasper’s bustling downtown: “It’s lively here, so we stay here.”



The opening of Huber’s ice cream factory and cheese shop was a diversification project to sustain the family business. /Photo by Libby Peterson

Name: Huber’s Orchard and Winery
Opened: 1843
Current generation: 6th

From 80 acres in 1843 to more than 600 today, Huber’s Orchard and Winery has expanded a farmstead into one of the first combined winery and distilleries in the state. Current owners Ted and Greg Huber are the sixth generation owners and can’t wait for it to continue into the seventh and eighth.

Ask Marcella (known as Marcie) Hawk what she remembers about her great-grandma and namesake Marcella Huber, and she’ll tell you about her matriarch’s feel for good produce. Even though Marcella couldn’t see well toward the end of her life, she could still pick a bad apple out of a bunch just by touching them.

Marcie also worked with produce as a teenager at Huber’s, but with a slightly different goal. “My sister and I could sell you a bag of apples like there’s no tomorrow,” she jokes. As a seventh-generation Huber, Marcie worked there from the time she was 14 until she left for college. She served at the snack bar, sold cookies, baked cookies and bread and worked cash registers.

Her older brother always knew he wanted to take over the farm someday, but Marcie had other plans. After high school, she left Huber’s to study chemical engineering at Rose Hulman. “I thought Starlight would be in my rearview mirror,” she says.

That fall, Marcie drove away from more than 170 years of history that began in 1843, when Simon Huber settled on 80 acres of land in Starlight. A German immigrant, Simon already knew how to grow fruit and make wine. He passed that knowledge down through 1932, when Carl and Marcella took over the farm. They built a dairy barn, but switched back to growing fruit a couple of years later. As stores in Indianapolis, Cincinnati and Louisville started stocking their produce, Carl and Marcella transformed

their farm into a popular place for people to pick their own fruit. In 1978, the Hubers opened a winery, beginning the diversification trend they have focused on since. Last year alone, Huber’s took home Double Gold awards from the Indy International Wine competition for carbonated 2011 Valvin Muscat, brandy and apple brandy.

“When I was 18 years old, I didn’t realize the heritage my family had,” Marcie says. After graduation, she worked in chemical engineering for two years before coming back to the family business. Now, she works under her mom.

Marcie calls her mom her best friend. “I work with her every day and never get sick of her,” she says. To stay close, Marcie and her family eat dinner together every Sunday. She does admit, though, that it is sometimes difficult when your dad is your boss. “You learn to deal with who you are working with,” she says. “At the end of the day, I know that it’s my family and I love them.”

Their closeness means that even on days off, the Hubers can’t stay away. Marcie lives closer to Louisville than the rest of the Hubers so her husband has a shorter commute to his work, but she’ll somehow make it onto the farm for lunch or to run something to the bank on her time off. Huber’s only closes four times a year, at Easter, Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year’s. Even then, some family members are thinking of the business. “My dad still worries about the weather and the fields,” Marcie says.

It’s hard to plan too far ahead, but Huber’s is still growing. Marcie plans on being there for at least 30 more years. For now, Marcie’s dad, Greg, co-owns Huber’s with Ted. Greg focuses more on the business and farm, while Ted concentrates on the winery and distillery. Marcie’s brother has an infant daughter, celebrated as the first of the eighth generation of Hubers on the farm. “That’s everyone’s drive. We want to be able to provide for our family and the future generations that come along,” Marcie says.



The main room of Marion Kay Spices displays many of the store's goods, old tools and artifacts. The store has been in Brownstown for more than 60 years. /Photo by Libby Peterson

Name: Marion Kay Spices
Opened: 1922
Current generation: 3rd

Although it began in St. Louis, Marion Kay Spices has made Brownstown its home since 1950. The grandchildren of founder Marion K. Summers own and operate the nationally known spice supplier, which got its start by providing the original KFC seasonings in 1965.

Kordell Reid, president of Marion Kay Spices, no longer notices the scent of his store—always peppery, but with hints of other extracts or seasonings being made that day. It's the same pepper that his grandfather built the business on. The pepper's still washed in the same machine his grandfather purchased. The only thing that's changed is the ownership.

Although Marion Kay sells spices to restaurants around the world now, it started by dabbling in other fields. In 1922, 16-year-old Marion Kordell Summers left high school, without a job or anything in his wallet. To scrape by, he sold silver cleaner to ladies in church groups around the Midwest. From them he got his big idea: to make a better vanilla extract than the imitations currently on the market. By 1928, Summers was doing well enough to open up shop by the name of Marion Kay Products Company in St. Louis.

He outlasted the Depression by selling a wide range of products like vanilla extract and sneezeless pepper, but that wasn't enough to tide him through World War II. Gasoline rationing prompted him to add a mail-order service that evolved into a full-blown print shop. Then, he let groups sell his products as fundraisers. Any group selling more than 36 bottles of vanilla for a dollar each received a free 48-cup electric coffee urn.

A camping trip brought him to Brownstown, where Summers saw the abandoned Thompson Sled building. Marion Kay had found a new home that could handle the company's growth. The business would end up staying in Brownstown for more than 60 years, despite a massive loss 15 years after moving. They had earned their fame by producing KFC's first famous chicken seasoning, but they lost the account in the late 1960s when the Colonel lost a lawsuit against franchisees who weren't producing chicken

the way he wanted. The new KFC decided to go with a different supplier. Marion Kay moved on.

Kordell learned to judge flavors across the street from the store, where he grew up next to his grandparents' house. Instead of packing a lunch, his dad, James Reid, would bring home food from work during the summers. Whatever was being tested that day made its way onto the table. No one was exempt from the taste-testing. Employees, family, everyone had input on the latest seasonings. "If it needed more salt, more pepper, maybe some garlic, or it didn't quite taste the way it should, all of us kids would make our opinion and they'd formulate it that way," he says.

Despite his early involvement and namesake, Kordell had no idea that he would end up in the family business. He attended Texas A&M to study radio broadcasting, graduating in 1984. That same year, he married his girlfriend, and Summers passed away. Kordell remembers that his grandfather had been looking for his help in the store, but the newlywed in Texas felt that he was too far away. After his grandfather's death, his grandmother took over the business briefly. Kordell purchased the business a couple years later with his father and brother to keep Marion Kay in their family.

He promised his new wife that he wouldn't let the business take over their lives. She worked for American Airlines in Dallas and was transferred to Indianapolis, so they moved to a middle-ground in Columbus, where they live today. The 40-minute commute to work is one of the best parts.

"It gives me that separation of business with family. I don't bring home any hassles of the day," he says.

Kordell now owns Marion Kay with his sister Pam Warren. Their plans for the future include doing what they've always done. "Once people know about us, they're so loyal," he says. Marion Kay is still small enough that orders are placed and shipped the same day. However, they want to try to distribute some of their better-known seasonings nationwide.

No matter how well you do, Kordell acknowledges it's not easy being in business with your family. He focuses on keeping an open mind and having patience. "You're never going to see eye to eye on every issue, so recognize that everyone has an equal voice," he says.

Can-do canning

An insider's guide to preserving summer's freshest produce.

BY RACHEL GRAHAM AND HEATHER HOURIGAN

Steam rises from an enormous pot as jars jiggle inside. Cucumber skins cascade from the trash can. Coriander seeds spill off the counter and bounce on the hardwood floors. Pungent vinegar wafts through the kitchen and lingers in the sticky air. Strawberry juice stains the ruffles on our aprons.

We're first-time canners. And no, we look nothing like your grandma — although we're probably using some of her recipes. Canning and pickling might seem an unlikely hobby for two girls in their twenties. However, as more individuals embrace the idea of local and sustainable produce, a renewed interest in food preservation has surfaced throughout the 812 region. And we're not the only ones who've noticed.

The National Center for Home Food

Preservation reports that one in five U.S. households has tried canning. That's a lot of Ball jars.

Annie Corrigan, producer for the WFIU Public Radio segment "Earth Eats," has documented the trend in interviews with local canning and pickling experts. She believes the shift toward local and homegrown produce has sparked the interest. "People are growing their own food, which means they're getting more cucumbers than they know what to do with. So instead of throwing food away, they're canning."

Processing your own produce can seem daunting. We at 812 have researched the science of canning, interviewed the experts and tested the recipes to compile an insider's guide to preserving your Indiana produce this summer.