

GROWERTALKS

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Behind the Business: A Tough Neighborhood

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Occasionally, *GrowerTalks* likes to reveal little-known details about the birth, growth or success of a well-known horticultural business. This month: Hummert International, which got its start during the Depression in what turned out to be a pretty shady section of St. Louis.

Pictured: Saturday barbecue at the Paradise Temple Church of God in Christ, where Sonny (pictured, he thinks) often bought lunch for the staff.

August H. "Sonny" Hummert III, has a second-degree black belt in aikido, judo and karate. Not for just for recreation or exercise, and not because he's a Bruce Lee fan, but for protection while at work at his family's business.

"The purpose of [the black belt] was to be able to haul the winos out of our facility ... they would come in our store and harass our employees and customers or steal the flats of tomatoes or whatever we'd have out front. I'd have to go chase them down the block to stop them and get the flat back," he recalls with a laugh.

That sketchy neighborhood was the east end of Chouteau Avenue (pronounced show-toe) not far from the Mississippi river near midtown St. Louis. It was presumably a pretty nice neighborhood when Sonny's grandfather, August Sr., founded A.H. Hummert Seed Company in 1932. A German immigrant, August Sr. had worked for St. Louis Seed Company before deciding to go it alone at age 53. Wisely, he bought a building on Chouteau just half a block from the new St. Louis Floral Market, established just five years earlier on LaSalle Street. All the Midwest mum and rose growers would wholesale their flowers there and August capitalized on that.

August started with seeds, but quickly added greenhouse supplies to his listing, which eventually swelled to a

40-page catalog. His son, August Jr. joined the growing company after his WWII service. Sonny came on board in 1961. By then, while Hummert's business had been booming, the neighborhood had gotten a bit, well, rough.

"I don't know when things got shady," Sonny says. "All I know is that when I joined the company, [Chouteau Avenue] was going downhill."

Sonny remembers a grocery store, Servian's Market, where they would occasionally buy lunch. "They had a window on the side of the building where winos would buy their liquor. They'd start drinking the booze and start creating havoc."

What sort of havoc? Well, besides the occasional stolen flat of tomatoes or brick through the window that would drag Sonny out of bed to meet the police, there was the flaming mattress incident.

"One Sunday I was at work, and one of the winos lit a mattress on fire and hauled this flaming mattress to the vestibule of our building. If I wasn't there to take that mattress out into the street, we would have had no company whatsoever."

When it wasn't winos, it was Mother Nature. "We were on the lower part of Chouteau, and whenever we had a bad rain, the sewers couldn't take the water," Sonny says. "We'd have water up to our knees in the company. There was a time when my dad and I had to park up on an adjacent street and walk hand-in-hand [to keep from being swept away] into the company to find out how much damage the water did. We had probably three big floods like that."

It wasn't all bad on Chouteau Avenue, however. Across the street in a dilapidated building was the Paradise Temple Church of God in Christ, where every Saturday a church lady would barbecue to raise money. Sonny recalls having lunch there many times, sometimes buying ribs for the entire staff. "Back in those days it was better than my wife's cooking!" he jokes.

August Sr. passed away in 1970 and August Jr. passed away just four years later, leaving 33-year-old Sonny in charge. On-the-job training under his grandfather had been invaluable, but he had his own ideas about how to move the company forward—such as investing in a computer. He did that, and he also grew the catalog from 40 pages to 152, turning it into the greenhouse "wishbook" that's on every grower's bookshelf.

Sonny also wanted to move—not necessarily because of the neighborhood, which started to improve in the 1980s—but because Hummert was outgrowing the space. So in 1995, Hummert International (as the company was renamed in 1993) moved 18 miles northwest to Earth City, Missouri.

Under Sonny's leadership (along with his brother, Pete, who runs their greenhouse department), Hummert has continued to grow. Their 2014-2015 catalog is a hefty 704 pages. And not forgetting that they've always sold seeds, plants and cuttings, they have catalogs for each of those divisions.

Is there anything Sonny misses about the Chouteau Ave. days? Yes, he replies. "I miss the day when you bought gas for 19.9 cents and they checked your tires. People are just a different breed today compared to

yesteryear. But we still have a great team running our company. We've always believed in customer service, from the Chouteau days all the way to out here [in Earth City]. Customers make paydays possible."

And the church barbecue across the street?

"Miss that, too. But my wife learned how to match it. She's got a secret recipe for barbecue sauce. Of course, she won't tell me what it is" **GT**