



January-February 2008

Institutions

Five Over Fifty



Alameda's Baby Boomer Businesses

The late 1940s marked a turning point in American life. Alameda, like the rest of the nation, had survived some very bad times—a world war following close on the heels of an economic depression.

“During the war there were not a lot of things to buy,” says George Gunn, curator of the Alameda Museum. “After the war it was, ‘Old is out, let’s get modern.’ There was pent-up demand for new furniture, new styles of clothing.” Capitalizing on a captive shopping population (single-car and transit-dependent families were the norm), Alameda experienced its own version of the baby boom. New businesses sprang up in response to the needs of growing families and an optimistic outlook for the future.

They feed us; clothe us; heal our pets; preserve our memories; help turn our houses into homes—and they have been doing it for more than 50 years. Here are five Alameda baby boomer businesses, rooted in the upbeat postwar era, that continue to serve our needs, and our spirits, today.

Golden Needle Tailoring

In 1956, Del Blaylock was an up-and-coming salesman at Albur’s Menswear, then one of 20 men’s clothing stores in Alameda. Blaylock advanced to general manager, purchased half the company, and the shop morphed into Golden Needle Tailoring, in its current location since 1984. Known for alterations, the shop still sells custom suits, sports jackets and pants, and rents tuxes for special occasions. Blaylock has seen fashions come and go, including shiny sharkskin suits in

the '50s and '60s that were “iridescent, almost electric, rayon. And polyester suits which lasted for life.”

Since the 1980s, women’s alterations have constituted 70 percent of his business. “If men are covered and warm, they’re happy. Ladies care more about style,” says Blaylock. He also sees a trend back toward dressier clothing. “Business casual is too casual,” he contends, and offers seminars on his “dress-for-success” philosophy. Of his 52 years in the tailoring business, Blaylock says one thing remains true: “Outdated clothing brings back memories. We aren’t just restoring a coat; we’re restoring a piece of art.” *Golden Needle Tailoring, 1903 Encinal Ave., (510) 522-2628.*

Encinal Market

Dale Wendling, an eighth-grader when Encinal Market opened its doors in 1952, secured a job at the new grocery store doing all-purpose cleanup. By age 19, he attained the position of assistant manager. He was so dedicated to the store that, had it been possible, he would have married his wife, Connie, at the checkout counter. As it was, they circled the parking lot three times, horns blaring, to announce their nuptials. In 1979, Wendling, offered the opportunity to purchase the grocery, stepped up to the challenge.

During the Market’s early years, “it was a blue-collar economy,” says Wendling. “The market carried very basic food—meat, potatoes and fresh vegetables.” The year 1954 ushered in the TV dinner: “Swanson chicken dinners sold like hotcakes. People started eating in their living rooms, not the kitchen,” he says. Over time, customer awareness of new products, like organics, “which have come on hot and heavy in the past three years,” has meant new items on the shelves. Remodeling the store four years ago revitalized customers and employees alike. But the staff knows the personal, friendly atmosphere keeps loyal customers coming back for more than just groceries. *Encinal Market, 3211 Encinal Ave., (510) 522-7171.*

Alameda Shade Shop

For 58 years, Alameda Shade Shop has dressed the windows of Island homes. Diane Hayes has operated the business, previously owned by her in-laws, for 14 years. Although Alameda’s stately Victorians have always been a top market for shades, modern architecture emerging after the war created different demands. “Before the war many window coverings were heavy, hand-painted canvas in shades of gray, green and khaki,” says Hayes. During lean times, homemakers sewed curtains from chintz and gingham fabrics; they bought roller shades for privacy and sun defense.

From the '60s to the '80s, sleek window dressings and neutral colors reigned. Hayes now sees a return to more traditional styles, richer colors—faux silks in terracotta, mustard and celery. Even with the introduction of double-paned windows, shades and curtains still enhance energy



efficiency. “Window coverings reflect pride in home,” says Hayes, “and are part of the remodeling process. Classic coverings are the icing on the cake, they finish off the room.” *Alameda Shade Shop, 914 Central Ave., (510) 522-0633.*

Providence Veterinary Medical Group

When Nathan Pugatch, D.V.M., opened his veterinary practice in 1946, Alameda was full of military families who had little money and no pets. To get his business underway, he stood outside his office handing out free puppies and kittens from the pound. “I said, ‘I will treat anything that can get through the front door.’ Then one day some Navy shipmen brought in their mascot—a lion.” In his early practice, he saw animals ranging from monkeys to chinchillas. During the past 60 years, he says, “Vaccines have improved, as has flea control, which in the ’40s and ’50s relied on DDT.”

During the baby boom, people settled down, added pets to their growing families and became more knowledgeable about pet health. Pugatch, now retired, and Randall Miller, D.V.M., Providence director, concur. “Leash laws have reduced the number of broken bones resulting from car accidents. People are spending more on medical treatment and grooming for their pets. Veterinary technology changes every 10 years, and there are now specialists for every condition. But spaying/neutering of pets remains a top concern to reduce the numbers of unwanted cats and dogs euthanized every year.” *Providence Veterinary Medical Group, 2304 Pacific Ave., (510) 521-6608; 1409 Webster St., (510) 512-5775. [A few weeks after this interview, Providence’s founder, Pugatch, died. The author, Noelle Robbins, says she feels fortunate to have had a chance to record some of his memories about his many years of veterinary practice.]*

Pauline’s Antiques

Pauline Kelley was 18 years old when she started selling antiques. She launched her career when her husband, a contractor tearing down Victorians, brought home households full of furniture and personal belongings, sometimes left behind by relocating military families. After 54 years, Kelley knows that vintage clothing is a perennial bestseller and is sought, as costume rentals, by Hollywood productions. “Every 20 to 30 years, clothes and jewelry come back into style. Girls want what their mothers and grandmothers wore,” she says.

Paintings and first-edition books are consistently popular at Pauline’s Antiques. Kelley assists customers in selling their collectables and encourages appraisals to determine value. “I had an owner who would have been happy to sell three paintings for \$50 each. After I arranged an appraisal, we learned the paintings were worth \$28,000.” Kelley considers herself a matchmaker of sorts. “I know what people are looking for. I am attuned to what my customers love and want, something someone will treasure.” *Pauline’s Antiques, 1427 Park St., (510) 523-9941.*

—By Noelle Robbins
—Photography by Craig Merrill