

Casey's Garden Shop: Kickin' it on Route 66 for 66 Years.

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Do you know the history of Route 66? It's a famous highway, memorialized in song and story and an essential part of mid-century Americana.

When it was finally completed in 1938, America's first 2,300-mile super highway connected the country by opening a direct route from Chicago to Los Angeles and offering a whole new freedom to America's families and entrepreneurs. For an entire generation, Route 66 was the road to opportunity.

One of the families who seized that opportunity and made the most of it is still in business today, running one of Bloomington's best-loved shops right on the corner of Main and Kelsey Streets, where it's been for 66 years.

Casey's Garden Shop was founded by Elden "Casey" Casebeer, a grocer from a small town called Horton, Kansas. Casebeer came to Bloomington in 1949 and opened the mom-and-pop grocery store first known as Casey's Market Basket. It was the only store to stay open all the time - 24 hours a day, 7 days a week - in 1949!

24/7 service wasn't Casebeer's only innovation. His store became famous for the impressive fruit baskets they created for local businesses. In fact, when the nearby Steak N Shake restaurant chain started to expand, employing hundreds of locals at the corporate commissary, each and every one of them received a Casey's Fruit Basket as a holiday gift from the company's founder, Gus Belt.

A strong supporter of local business from the very beginning, Casey's Market Basket also supplied food for Illinois State and Illinois Wesleyan Universities and to the executive suite kitchen of a young State Farm Insurance Company.

Long before the days of computerized delivery and dispatch systems, grocers in the 1950's had to arrange the transport of their own goods to stock their stores. Casebeer managed a trip every week to the produce markets in St. Louis.

Mr. and Mrs. Casebeer's only child, Alice Jayne (AJ, also known as Casey), graduated from ISNU with a degree in Family and Consumer Science and then taught at Decatur Senior High School. During this time, she was introduced to Ray Lartz, who was working for Stix, Baer and Fuller in downtown St. Louis. They were married in St. Louis on December 25, 1955.

Before leaving Bloomington for the wedding, Casebeer had to lock up the store. It was only then that he realized there were no locks on the doors! Since Casey's Market Basket was open all the time, he'd never needed to lock up before. Obviously, he couldn't be late for his daughter's wedding, so, being a resourceful entrepreneur, he nailed some boards up over the entrance and went off to the wedding.

He made it to the church in time to see them wed, and then, just two years later, AJ and Ray presented Casey with a grandson, Raymond Casey Lartz - also known as Casey.

Elden Casebeer built Casey's Market Basket into a successful business by working hard to deliver exceptional service to his customers, and adjusting to changing market conditions.

In 1969, he sold the grocery part of the business to a local partnership, but retained ownership of the garden shop.

By this time, Ray, AJ, Casey and his little sister Cindy had moved to Bloomington to help out with the family business, now known as Casey's Garden Shop. Ray Lartz came from a long line of retailers, so as he and AJ took over the garden shop business, it grew just as quickly as the flowers and plants they sold.

The Lartz family continued many of Casebeer's traditions, not only delivering flowers to area businesses, but employing students from both universities and a wide variety of future community and business leaders at the garden shop.

Providing jobs and training for the next generation is a noble endeavor, but as Casey Lartz can tell you, "It's not without risk. Once, we sent a young driver over to ISU to make a delivery. He decided to drive the delivery van across the quad instead of finding a parking place, and we got a call from campus security. Another time, the fraternities over at Wesleyan had a competition to see who could steal the most Christmas trees. Campus security came to the rescue again, though, and we got our trees back in time for the holiday. The fact is, we've trained some of our students so well that they've gone on to open their own successful garden shops, and now we're competitors!"

Casebeer's tradition of exceptional customer service continues, too. Perhaps the best story involves a local woman who is a big fan of country music superstar Garth Brooks. A really big fan. The kind of fan who follows his tour to its different stops around the country. The kind of fan who's been to dozens of shows. The kind of fan that Brooks can actually pick out of the audience. How does he recognize her? Because she always brings him the same bouquet of flowers – a dozen roses, baby's breath, tall silver ting ting and a big silver bow – straight from Casey's Garden Shop. "We once opened the store at 3 am just to make sure Garth's biggest fan had flowers for him that night at his show. You can see the bouquet for yourself – Garth is holding it in the photo on the back of the liner notes on his 1998 CD, *Double Live*," according to Lartz.

Casey Lartz is Ray and AJ's son, and he's minding the store these days. He says that the company continues to be successful because of their commitment to that kind of customer service. "Sixty six years is a long time to stay in business, and I think we continue to be successful because we're committed to our customers and to delivering the best service in town. We're not the cheapest place in town to buy plants and flowers, you can do that at any chain store. But I'll bet we're the only place in town that will open up at 3 am to serve up one sale to one customer," said Lartz.

"Our products and services have changed over the years, of course, but our underlying values have remained the same. We deliver something special for everyone who comes in. People ask me about the future of the shop – how do we compete against the internet retailers, how does a place like this stay relevant – and I always give them the same answer: if we can have fun with it, we run with it. I think everyone on our staff would agree," he continued.

And they do, indeed, have fun. From the second-generation employees who run the water gardening department to the floral design artists who teach classes on how to gild a pumpkin for the holidays, there's a warm feeling of family throughout the shop.

2015 marks 66 years on Route 66 for Casey's Garden Shop. They were nominated for membership in the Route 66 Hall of Fame several years ago and look forward to playing a major part in the community's plans to market Bloomington as a destination for Route 66 enthusiasts.

Wherever your journey takes you, be sure to stop and smell the roses – just take Route 66 right on over to Casey's Garden Shop.

Casey's Garden Shop is open from 8-6 Monday through Saturday, and 9-6 on Sunday all year long, at 1505 N. Main Street in Bloomington. Call 309-828-1424 to discuss the perfect arrangements for your next big event or visit them on the web at www.caseysgardenshop.com.