

Chapter 01 – Introduction

Announcer: Petty's Fine Foods was a specialty food store in Tulsa, Oklahoma's Utica Square. It closed in February 2016 after more than 70 years of being a staple of Tulsa shoppers.

The grocery store was established in 1945 by L.G. Rowan and Robert Petty. The business, which was then called Rowan & Petty, opened at the corner of East 21st Street and South Wheeling Avenue. The store quickly became known as the best purveyor of meats and groceries in Tulsa.

During the 1940s and 1950s, Rowan & Petty established itself as a specialty food store offering charge accounts, delivery, quality meats, and outstanding service. In 1972 it moved to its recent location in Utica Square.

The last owner of Petty's Fine Foods, Scott Petty, talks about his life prior to his involvement with the store and the growth of the store up to 2016 in his oral history interview for VoicesOfOklahoma.com and podcast.

Chapter 02 – 10:05 Carry Out Boy

John Erling (JE): My name is John Erling, and today's date is April 4th, 2016.
Scott, would you state your full name, please?

Scott Petty (SP): Robert Scott Petty.

JE: Your date of birth?

SP: October 4th, 1947.

JE: And your present age?

SP: 68.

JE: We're recording this interview here in the recording facilities of Voices of Oklahoma. And by the way, you chose to go by Scott. And why is that?

SP: My father's name is Robert Joseph Petty, and so I was named after him, Robert Scott Petty. So I suppose to have my own identity and avoid confusion, I went by my middle name.

JE: Where were you born?

SP: Tulsa, Oklahoma, St. John Hospital.

JE: Do you have brothers and sisters?

SP: Yes, I have two brothers and one sister. I'm the oldest in the family.

JE: The brothers, what are they doing?

SP: One brother is here. He owns a business here. National Occupational Health Services. That's my brother, Brad Petty. Another brother, Michael, lives in Kansas City. He is a general manager for a car dealership. And my sister, Diane, lives in Oklahoma City.

JE: Your mother's name?

SP: Leatrice.

JE: We'll talk more about her. And then your father's name?

SP: Robert J.

JE: Let's talk a bit about your education. What was the first elementary school you went to?

SP: I started out at Lanier Elementary and ended up finishing at Barnard, which is burned down, unfortunately. In between time, my father was recalled into the Air Force when they formed the Strategic Air Command. And we moved around to several military bases for his training. Finally, he got out and came back to Tulsa in 1957.

JE: You would have been how old then?

SP: I was in the fifth grade when we came back to Tulsa.

JE: Then your junior high and high school work, where did you attend?

SP: Junior high, Woodrow Wilson and High School Memorial.

JE: And then on to college?

SP: Yes, OSU.

JE: Did any of your work in college knowingly prepare you for the grocery store business?

SP: Well, I had worked in the business as a youngster and some of the summers of my college years. I really didn't have it in my mind I was going to go into the business. But yes, it obviously did give me the experience and prepared me.

JE: When did you start working in the grocery store? Were you pretty young, I suppose?

SP: Pretty young. I was just carrying out packages. I was what we called a courtesy clerk and sacked groceries and carried them out. I remember those days really well and a lot of stories.

JE: How old would you have been?

SP: Probably about 12. Of course, child labor laws weren't enforced in those days.

JE: Did you enjoy it? Did you have fun?

SP: I had a lot of fun. I remember some prominent Tulsans would come in. I was telling somebody a story the other day. J.P. Walker, who owned the National Tank Company here, he was a customer. And the courtesy clerks would almost get in a fistfight to carry his groceries out because he tipped big. He'd lay a \$5 bill on us and that was huge money. I mean, I could take a \$5 bill and that would be good for the weekend. This is when I was about 16 years old. We had a lot of fun, though.

JE: Did people often tip you? And what were the size of their tips then?

SP: Most of the tips were probably in the range of like 50 cents, that kind of a thing.

JE: So we're talking again in 19...

SP: In the 1960s.

JE: In the 1960s.

SP: So if somebody gave a \$5 tip in those days, that was huge.

JE: Were you known then as the owner's son?

SP: Yes, to a lot of people I was, but some people, of course, didn't know that.

JE: So it was your father then operating the store?

SP: My father and then one of my grandfathers, at that point.

JE: After your OSU work, then what did you do?

SP: When I graduated, I was commissioned as second lieutenant in the infantry. And I went to the infantry officer school at Fort Benning, Georgia. Graduated from there and then I went to flight school and began my primary flight training at Fort Walters, Texas.

Then moved on to the advanced flight training at Fort Rucker, Alabama. When I graduated from flight school, I was under orders at that point to go to Vietnam and went to Vietnam. And served a year as a helicopter pilot in an assault helicopter company. We were flying UH-1 Hueys, better known as.

JE: Let's get into that a little more. What kind of action would you have seen there?

SP: We were flying in support of the 30th ROK Division, as in Republic of Korea, ROK. 30th ROK Division. It was probably the elite fighting division of the Korean Army. It might be like the 101st Airborne or something like that.

We inserted them into the jungles for their operations and extracted them at the end of their operations. Saw some combat there. We also did a lot of other things like medical evacuation called dust-off in those days.

Resupply. I've flown generals' wives around, believe it or not. I did all kinds of things.

JE: Did you ever take any fire from the Vietnamese?

SP: It was the Viet Cong. Yes, we did come under fire sometimes with the Koreans. They were excellent soldiers. Usually, they pretty much took care

of the enemy. But there were times when we were under fire extracting the Koreans.

JE: Were you high enough or they just missed you?

SP: Well, in the old days, if you were 2,500 feet or greater, that was considered out of the range of small arms fire. But we had to come down into the jungle clearings to land the troops in there. So, you know, at that time, we were very vulnerable.

JE: Did you ever have situations where you wondered, "this is it, this is my final flight"?

SP: There were times where I thought that. But my daughter asked me that question one time. And I told her, and it's the truth. Flying a helicopter that's fully loaded and trying to land a bunch of troops as part of a military operation is so demanding that you literally don't have time to be scared or think about being afraid. Just doing the basic job is so consuming that it takes your mind away from it.

JE: Do you have any situations where you came in for what you thought was going to be a landing and just it wasn't good to negotiate that and had to fly off?

SP: Well, I remember one time on an operation, we were landing one after another. And there were probably 10 of us on final approach, one behind the other. And we were landing and letting off troops. I was the last guy in. The ship ahead of me was being flown by a fellow pilot and a friend of mine. And he landed on an anti-personnel mine.

It blew up the bottom of the helicopter. Well, fortunately, the whole deck was lined with flak vests. And he was not injured and his crew was not injured. But the helicopter was disabled. I was on final approach and he sort of blew up in front of me. I had to make an immediate go around.

In the meantime, my commanding officer was like 5,000 feet above us on the radio saying, "what's going on down there?" And I said, "sir," which you're not supposed to say over the radio. But by that time, radio procedure was out the window. I said, "sir, I'm having to do a go around. One of our ships is blowing up down there." And he said, "get down there, get the Koreans on the ground and get that crew and get them out of

there.”

So I did that because an operation was going on and there was an enemy in the area. They were concerned that this explosion, of course, was going to alert the enemy. So, yeah, that was one time things didn't go quite as planned.

JE: You must have received some nice commendations for that kind of work.

SP: I've got a few.

JE: What did you receive?

SP: Some of the highest ones are a bronze star, air medal. I've got five air medals and a Vietnamese cross of gallantry, which is a foreign decoration awarded by the Vietnamese government.

JE: And what year was it again?

SP: This was 1971, 72. We were in two corps along the South China Sea.

JE: There were actually Koreans helping the United States fight that Vietnam War.

SP: That's right. A lot of people don't know that. But there were a lot of Koreans over there.

JE: Yeah.

SP: Very good soldiers.

JE: Did you ever make a visit back to Vietnam?

SP: John, I was part of a trade delegation that was slated to go over there in the 1990s. I was on the board of directors of the Tulsa Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce at that time. And we were sending a delegation and Mary Fallon, I believe, was the lieutenant governor at that time. She was heading this delegation. We had a meeting at the Tulsa Club and the North Vietnamese ambassador showed up.

When I saw that North Vietnamese flag, the whole thing just kind of soured in my mind and I just decided I didn't want to go back. So I politely

bowed out of the delegation. I never said why, but it bothered me a little bit. So I just didn't go back.

JE: Mm-hmm.

SP: But I still would like to go back someday. Just not under that setup.

JE: Yeah. We forget how that lingers with soldiers.

SP: Well, he was being treated like a celebrity and great deference was being shown to him. And that bothered me. It was just too fresh in my mind. So I politely bowed out of that trip.

Chapter 03 – 9:30 **Petty's First Store**

John Erling (JE): So then when did you leave the military and come home to Tulsa?

Scott Petty (SP): Well, I was in Hawaii. I had a delay in route. My commanding officer gave me what's called a delay in route, which was very nice of him. I stayed in Hawaii for about four or five days. And I called my dad and I said, "you know, I'm on U.S. soil and I'm coming home and I have a chance to get out early." And he said, "well, I think you ought to take it, come back and get in the grocery business."

The crazy thing was at that time I went on to California. And while I was in California being out processed. I was offered a job to fly for the Israelis. So I called my dad and I said, "I don't think I'm coming home. An Israeli major has offered me a job to fly for them."

Of course, he thought that was about the craziest thing he ever heard in his life, which it was. He said, "you'll be like what they call a soldier of fortune. And if you get captured over there, you're not under the protection of the Geneva Convention or the U.S. military." He was a former pilot. He well understood all this. And I said, "wow, never thought about that. So you're right, that grocery business doesn't sound so bad after all." So I came home.

JE: The store that we now know as Petty's Fine Food started in February 1945.

SP: Yes.

JE: Tell us how it had its beginnings.

SP: My two grandfathers started the business. A lot of people don't know that. L.G. Rowan looks like it's Rowan, but he pronounced it Row-wan. And Robert D. Petty, my two grandfathers, worked at Fikes Food Stores. Fikes was right across the street from St. John Medical Center on Utica Avenue, about the 1900 block.

My grandfather Petty was the meat manager. He did all the meat buying, and they had a tremendous meat department there. My other grandfather, Mr. Rowan, ran the grocery store, basically, and the front end of the grocery store. He was the store manager. So the two of them were key players in this store. According to my grandfather, Mr. Fikes had them on a bonus plan, and he felt like the bonus wasn't being honored properly, and there was some dispute there.

They got upset with him and said, "we're leaving. We're going to start our own business." And he said, "you boys will fail. You don't have the capital. You don't have the backing. You don't have the experience. There's no way you can make it." And my grandfather said, "well, I've got commitments from the top 20 customers here, and some of them have guaranteed my note at the bank, so we're going ahead with it."

And at that time, Mr. Fikes said, "well, where are you going to open? Is this somewhere way out of town?" And he said, "no, right around the corner from you." Well, that shook him up. And then at the last minute, according to my grandfather, he wanted to buy in and said, "I'll be partners with you boys." My grandfather said, "no, we don't want you as a partner." So they started that business, and they took a tremendous amount of customers with them, and they never looked back.

JE: Did Fikes then close their doors eventually because of that?

SP: They did. I'm not saying it was directly as a result of that, but I think it certainly had something to do with it.

JE: It was interesting background. 1945, World War II was not yet official. It wasn't officially over until May. Franklin Roosevelt was president. He died April of that year, 1945. Harry Truman became the 33rd president. The mayor of Tulsa was a Republican, Olney F. Flynn.

SP: He was a customer, by the way.

JE: Oh, is that right?

SP: Yes.

JE: You carried his groceries out for him, probably.

SP: Probably did.

JE: You could probably name all the mayors on the way that would shop there.

SP: Well, I knew a lot of them.

JE: The store was open. Under what name?

SP: It was opened under Rowan and Petty Fine Foods in 1945. We were at 1829 East 21st Street, which is part of the St. John parking garage now, just to the west of Wendy's on 21st Street.

JE: How did they come up with the money to start the store?

SP: My great uncle, Saul Shore, who owned quite a few restaurants and hotels around town, was a guarantor on the note. And another customer, Mrs. Bailey Vinson, she loaned my grandfathers, I think it was \$7,500, which was a lot of money in those days, and she agreed to take it back in groceries over a period of time. So they paid her back in groceries. She was a big reason they were able to do what they did.

JE: She liked the store and liked your grandfather that much.

SP: Yes.

JE: He had that kind of personality obviously.

SP: Both of them, yes. She did like them. and wanted to help them be successful.

JE: Now, is it true that in that corner there, 21st and South Wheeling Avenue, that previous tenants had actually failed in that location?

SP: Yes, I believe that's true, and I don't know much of the history of that, but I think that is right.

JE: 21st Street, for a lot of people, would have been the edge of town?

SP: It was. It was the edge of town in those days. I remember when the Utica Square Shopping Center opened, and I believe it was early 1950s, it was considered on the edge of town. It was a suburban shopping center.

JE: Do you remember the thoughts of your grandparents or yourself when that shopping center opened? This was an exciting thing, or did you think it was going to last because it was on the edge of town?

SP: Well, it's interesting you said that. I remember my grandfather, Rowan, taking me as a young boy. I was probably about five years old, and he took me to watch the construction one day. They're moving all this earth, and they're building Utica Square. And he said, "that shopping center will never make it because all the business is downtown. That's where all the stores are."

So if you want to shop, you go downtown. Renberg's, Vandiver's, Brown Duncan, all the major stores were in downtown Tulsa. And he couldn't imagine how that was going to work, but obviously it did.

JE: Do you remember some of the first stores they had in Utica Square?

SP: Well, I remember the hardware store there. I believe that Dale Carter, who was the original owner, I think, of Utica Square, had a hardware store there. There was an old bowling alley, the Utica Bowl bowling alley, which was one of the biggest bowling alleys in the United States at that time.

And that, incidentally, is where our store ended up. Vandiver's, I believe, was one of the first tenants in there. Mary Lou's Bakery was an old one. And Walgreens Drugstore was there. Then it became Med-X, and then Walgreens again.

JE: Okay.

SP: So that's kind of interesting.

JE: Well, to put in a bowling alley was probably a stroke of genius because it would bring people to that area just for bowling. It was a great draw.

SP: It was a great draw. I remember when I was in middle school, going in there and playing on the pinball machines, which my mother thought was a horrible thing, that I would end up a hopeless juvenile delinquent. Everybody's mother didn't like the bowling alley. And we just lived about a block from there, near Utica Square. So I would hang out there as a kid.

JE: The grocery store from the beginning, was it established as a specialty store, do you think, or general groceries?

SP: Well, it was a specialty store, but not really marketed in that way at that time. We always had a full line of groceries. So you could buy laundry detergent at our store, but we didn't have 70 kinds of laundry detergent. Maybe we had 10. So you could buy everything you needed.

JE: What other grocery stores would have been considered competition? Beyond Fikes, of course, at the beginning, were there other stores?

SP: In the beginning, you're asking, probably not too many stores. Well, Wolferman's was a competitor. We ended up buying them in 1972, but they were a Kansas City-based company, and the specialty store, was a specialty food business. So they were a competitor.

JE: Did Humpty Dumpty ever make it to Tulsa? Were they here?

SP: Yes. Interestingly enough, at one time in Utica Square, there were four or five grocery stores. That's hard to believe. Humpty Dumpty was there. Safeway was there. Wolferman's was there. And we were right across the street. So you had all those stores in that little shopping center.

That's back when everybody went to the grocery store to buy their food. I mean, we only had two or three nice restaurants in Tulsa. You know, if you had a special occasion, you wanted to go to a really nice restaurant, there were only two or three of them in town.

JE: Remember any names of those?

SP: Well, the Louisiana was one of them, down on Boston. I remember Bishop's downtown was a place where a lot of people would like to go. It was a different style. It was more of a grill, I guess, so to speak. There was a restaurant on South Harvard. I believe it was Country Fair. But there just weren't that many.

Chapter 04 – 6:56
Robert J. Petty

John Erling (JE): So these grocery stores came in after Rowan & Petty had started their store, which must have made them feel really, really nervous because some of them were chain stores.

Scott Petty (SP): It was really easy for us to compete against the chains. They didn't bother us too much. The more serious competition came a little bit later, like McCartney's and Sipes, stores like this, that were locally owned and operated and had, you know, good owners and managers. They were tougher competition.

JE: Why would the chains not be stiff competition for you?

SP: In those days, for one thing, they were all union. They had high labor costs, and that translated into them having higher prices. Everything tended to be cookie cutter in those days. So if you had a Humpty Dumpty store, it was laid out a certain way, like all the other Humpty Dumpty stores.

The cereal was always on a certain aisle, whereas the local stores tailored their business more to the market and their customers, which, of course, is what you want to do.

JE: And they failed. They closed their doors.

SP: Almost all the big chains are gone now.

JE: You offered charge accounts?

SP: Yes. We stayed with that because it made us different. In the old days, most all the stores did that. They had the charge accounts. But fast forward to 2000, for instance, no one was doing it except us. And we really quit opening new accounts. But people that were grandfathered in with a charge account, we continued that.

JE: Did you become known for other things? I suppose customer service?

SP: Yes. Specialty food products, the custom cut meats, high quality beef. We only carried USDA prime and choice meat. Our bakery was just

outstanding. In the 1990s, my wife Maureen started a catering business, which became phenomenally successful.

JE: How about the pricing of the store as it started out in '45 and then up into '50? How did you compare price-wise to other stores?

SP: Well, it's interesting. We always had the image of being the high-priced store. Everybody thought, "oh, I can't afford to shop there" and that kind of stuff. Really and truly, on the like items, we were competitively priced. But we had the image of being high-priced because when you have high-quality stuff, you charge more for it.

The USDA prime and choice beef was more expensive, and we had a higher price than a store that had lesser quality. Same thing with the baked goods and the produce. But if you compared us on a Del Monte can of cut green beans, we were right with everybody else.

JE: And that's been all along, even up until 2016.

SP: Yes.

JE: But everybody does believe that you're higher priced. And you're saying it's because of the products that were higher quality.

SP: Yeah. So in some ways, you could say, yes, we were higher priced, but we were offering higher quality products that cost more. I've had customers say to me, "you know what, I thought this place was too expensive for me to shop in. But now that I've come here and I've shopped around the store, I realize you get what you pay for."

JE: Then there was a point when your grandfather, L.G. Rowan, retired.

SP: Yes.

JE: And he retired when?

SP: He retired in 1969.

JE: So then what happens? If he retires, then who comes in?

SP: Okay. My father at that time, Robert J. Petty, as I said earlier, he returned to Tulsa in 1957. So he and my grandfather, Rowan, were partners. My grandfather, Petty, had retired pretty early in 1957. So they were partners.

And then when my grandfather, Rowan, retired in '69, my father became the sole owner and bought him out. Then not too long after that, I came back from Vietnam and joined my father and we went from there.

JE: Now let's talk about your father, Robert J. Petty.

SP: Yes.

JE: Describe his personality.

SP: He was kind of a tough guy and a tough, shrewd businessman. I learned a lot from him. And I think more than anything, I learned how to work. He had a tremendous work ethic. He would get up early in the morning and go hard at it until the end of the day, six, seven days a week.

JE: As you've alluded to, he was in the military as well.

SP: He had been in World War II. He was on a B-17 crew flying out of England. They flew missions over Germany toward the end of the war. He got out and it was a real shock to go to his mailbox one day in 1951 and find that he'd been recalled into the service. We had to leave Tulsa and at that time, he owned a delicatessen.

That was a huge, upsetting blow to the family.

JE: You would've been how old?

SP: I was about four years old at the time.

JE: Okay. Where did you go?

SP: The first place we went was Savannah, Georgia. To the Air Force base there. Might have been Hunter. Anyway, we went there and he went through various phases of training in B-47. So we went to Savannah, we went to Houston, Texas, went to Sacramento, California and finally ended up in Tucson, Arizona at the Davis-Monthan Air Force Base in Tucson. We were there for three years and then came back to Tulsa.

JE: But why had he been recalled?

SP: They were forming the Strategic Air Command. This was at the height of the Cold War. The Strategic Air Command was formed and built to provide long-range strategic bombing pretty much because of the threat of the

Russians. And they had targets inside the Soviet Union. If you've ever seen the movie Failsafe, that's sort of what he did.

And I remember him going on some of these missions. They would scramble the pilots, they'd get in the plane. The bombs would be armed and they would head toward the Soviet Union. And then at some time, through coded messages, the bombers would be recalled and they would say, "this is a drill."

They never knew. And he said one time they got so deep, he thought they were actually going in. But they finally got recalled right before they came into Russian airspace.

JE: He must have been a decorated soldier himself.

SP: He was in World War II. Yes. And of course, in the Cold War, you weren't really in combat. You were just training to be in combat. He was in World War II. He was part of the 8th Air Force.

Chapter 05 – 8:00

Scott Wore His Uniform

John Erling (JE): So you just did what he did. You were in the military.

Scott Petty (SP): In a way, yeah.

JE: And the grocery business?

SP: I think the interesting part of that is that the leading edge of that baby boom generation, of which I was a part of, many of our fathers had served in World War II. So when the Vietnam War came along, we just thought, this is what we're supposed to do.

I remember my dad telling me, when the Marines landed in Vietnam at Da Nang in 1965, that war will be over in a matter of months. You'll never go to that. Well, six years later, you know, here I am flying in on a Pan-American chartered government plane landing at Tan Son Nhut Air Base in Saigon.

JE: What kind of feeling was that for you?

SP: That was a very eerie feeling. In those days, the government chartered civilian aircraft to fly the soldiers in. And my idea of being in the military at that point was sort of like these John Wayne movies I'd watched, you know, as a kid.

All of a sudden, when the pilot came on the intercom, he said, "Gentlemen, we're beginning our final approach to Tan Son Nhut Air Base Saigon. Should this aircraft come under attack on the runway, you're advised to do this and this and this. And you also will surrender all U.S. currency as soon as you deplane." And I thought, "Oh, Lord, what have I gotten myself into?"

JE: Yeah. And how old would you have been then?

SP: I was 24. And I was an old man compared to most of the guys.

JE: But it was in 70....

SP: '71.

JE: '71. And then you were there for that year.

SP: Yes.

JE: I'm sure there were many times you thought "I'm never coming back."

SP: There were times I thought that. You know, you have to have a fatalistic approach or you'd go crazy. So I just finally decided. You know what? When my number's up, it's up. I just can't worry about it.

JE: Interesting you say that. I've interviewed those who fought World War II. John Williams of the Williams Companies did great service there. He talked about they were firing at him here and everywhere. And that's what he said. Very same thing you said. You just get a fatalistic thought. If my number is up, fine. And people were dying all around him. He just kept going.

SP: Well, interestingly enough, I didn't fear death. I just thought, you know what? There isn't a bullet out there that's made for me. I was sort of fearless in that regard. But I did fear capture. And I don't know why. You know, I had this real fear of being captured by the North Vietnamese and put in one of those prison camps.

JE: And as it turned out, you weren't close to that at all.

SP: I never was. We were forced down one time in the jungle. We were hiding out in the jungle. And at that time, it really went through my mind. But we got rescued by a couple of Kit Carson scouts, is what they called them. They were ARVNs – Army of the Republic of Vietnam, South Vietnamese. They rescued us. And that was not an issue. But that was a fear I had.

JE: But it could have happened if you were.

SP: Yeah, it's possible. But we weren't flying over North Vietnam. We were in South Vietnam.

JE: Do many people who shopped with you know about your military record?

SP: Some do. People bring it up sometimes. But it used to really consume me. And I thought about it and talked about it and spoke in Vietnamese and all this stuff. And then over the years, all that's kind of faded out. I don't have the strong memories and the nightmares and all that that I did have at one time. So that's a good thing.

JE: Did it bother you when that war was so contested in the United States and there were demonstrations against it?

SP: It bothered me a lot.

JE: In fact, the 68th Presidential Convention was about the Vietnam War, and we know the major demonstrations there. So that bothered you and other soldiers.

SP: Yes, it bothered me a great deal when I was there. Because I felt like, regardless of the politics of the war, the American people should support the servicemen that were there. In 1968, I do remember the Democrat National Convention.

I remember watching it on television. And that was when I was in ROTC in college. I remember the streets of Chicago and all that went on there. And that was a dark period in American history, for sure.

JE: And then the respective soldiers coming back from the Vietnam War didn't seem to be all that great.

SP: That was terrible. I actually landed at Travis Air Force Base in San Francisco. And I was advised to change into civilian clothes as soon as I could. Because the returning veterans were being mocked and spit on and yelled at. And I remember so clearly that I decided, no, I'm gonna keep my uniform on. I just, I'm gonna stand tall in this airport.

I went to get my shoes shined because that's what soldiers do, you know? So I sat down at a shoe shine stand and there was an elderly Black gentleman there who was shining my shoes. And I had heard some of these taunts and things. When he finished I said, "what do I owe you?" He looked at me he said, "lieutenant, that one's on the house." I just thought that was so nice and I'll just never forget that as long as I live.

JE: So you wore your uniform home?

SP: Yes, I did.

JE: Did anybody say anything to you?

SP: Yeah, I had some, nothing serious but snide comments and that type of thing. You know, when I was in the airport especially. And the country was so divided at that time. I know I've done everything that I could do as a citizen today to be welcoming to our servicemen when they come back because I remember that. And I remember my dad telling me he was subjected to a ticker tape parade in New York City.

He landed there on the Queen Mary. The government had commandeered the Queen Mary as a troop ship and he was an officer so he was in first class accommodations on the Queen Mary. Lands and there are bands and ticker tape parades and everything. I was naive enough to think I was going to get that in California. I got a big shock.

JE: Isn't it something you've alluded to earlier that even though the country was divided they didn't have the respect for the soldier? Many of them were drafted, others volunteered. They didn't have the respect for the soldier they couldn't separate that, could they?

SP: They couldn't. And I never really understood that because I was in command of some of these kids. They were 18 and 19 years old first time they were away from home. I was an old man of course at 24, you know, very young, very impressionable. I just thought it was so unfair to them.

JE: You just said command at what level was it a platoon or what level company?

SP: Well, I was a pilot, you know, as an aircraft commander you were in command of a flight crew. But we had a number of warrant officers in my unit. Many of the helicopter pilots were warrant officers. That's not a full-fledged commissioned officer.

So if you were a commissioned officer in my unit at least you were kind of in the minority and you ended up having to supervise these warrant officers in one form or another. And that was a tough job because they were pretty independent guys.

JE: But you stood your ground and you had your rank.

SP: Well, I tried. And they were good pilots, great pilots.

JE: You were second lieutenant through all?

SP: I was a second lieutenant of course when I got my commission first lieutenant when I went to Vietnam. And then right before I got out I was a captain. Promotions came very quickly in a wartime army.

Chapter 06 – 10:00

Name Change

John Erling (JE): Was your personality like your father's?

Scott Petty (SP): Um, no, I'd say we were different in a lot of ways, but I guess there are definitely some similarities.

JE: You're very approachable and open and easy to talk to, and I can understand why people would be attracted to you coming into the store. They didn't know if your father had that kind of personality as well.

SP: He was good with people, I will say that he really was. We were different in many ways. I know he probably just pulled his hair out about the way I ran things. There were some differences, some similarities.

JE: So then, let's talk about your mother. What was her name?

SP: Leatrice.

JE: And her last name?

SP: Rowan.

JE: That's where the grandfather comes in. She was the daughter of LG.

SP: Yes.

JE: So describe your mother's personality..

SP: Even though she did not have a higher education she was well educated and informed and a very sophisticated lady in many ways and a very beautiful lady – my friends I remember in junior high school used to say “Wow your mother's really beautiful.”

And I just took it for granted everybody's mom looked like that but I guess they didn't.

JE: Well she modeled clothes, didn't she?

SP: She did in her younger days.

JE: Played the piano?

SP: Yes she played the piano. I can still remember her sitting in the living room playing Fur Elise which was a beautiful piece. I still love that piece.

JE: She worked with foreign students at the university of Tulsa.

SP: Yes, I think she did that through the assistance league, I believe. My memory's kind of hazy on that.

JE: Did she ever work in the store?

SP: No she didn't. And I remember that she influenced me in a number of ways, because when I was a young boy, she read to me constantly. And there were certain books that she thought you had to read as a young boy. They're mostly the classics like Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer. She read both of those books to me aloud. All the Robert Louis Stevenson books, those kinds of things she thought were very important.

JE: How far did she go in her education?

SP: She just had a high school diploma.

JE: So then, when does Petty's become Petty's Fine Foods?

SP: That was in 1972. Shortly after I came home, we formed a new corporation, and my father really wanted to change the name. And I remember thinking to myself that I didn't want him to, but he was the majority shareholder at that time. So he wanted to do that.

JE: Why didn't you want to change the name, which would have been from Rowan and Petty's, and you didn't want to change that?

SP: Well, I felt like we had a brand that had been built in the community with that name. And, you know, I had a lot of respect for my grandfather, and I just felt like we should keep that. It wasn't a huge deal, but anyway, we did change in 1972.

JE: I wonder if adding the name Fine Foods, people began to think that that was something special or different or higher class.

SP: Well, that was the idea.

JE: And it led to some people thinking that you were more expensive.

SP: And that was the other side of it. You're very astute to pick up on that. So it was a double-edged sword with that name.

JE: Right. Your wife, Maureen, how did you meet her? You were carrying out her groceries, I suppose?

SP: Well, interestingly enough, her family did shop with us a little. And my father knew her mother, but I didn't really know Maureen. And shortly after I came back from Vietnam, I went to the drive-in bank at the old Utica National Bank, which became F&M and then later Prosperity.

And I was going to make a deposit, and there was this beautiful teller behind the counter there. She was very friendly and had a beautiful smile. And blue as blue eyes I've ever seen. And I thought, "wow, that's a lady I'd like to get to know." And so we were talking, and she said, "Where did you get that deep suntan? I've never seen anybody with a suntan like that."

“Well, I had just come back from Vietnam,” and I said, “there's a long story behind that, and if you'll go out with me, I'll tell it to you.” And she said, well, “I have a boyfriend already.” And I said, “Well, so what?” And I was very persistent. Finally, she went out with me, and once we had that first date, it just clicked, and we never looked back.

JE: You said, “I got the suntan in a place where I never want to go back.”

SP: Exactly. There was a lot of downtime as a helicopter pilot. We were on the South China Sea. You could lay around on the beach and get a suntan. So it wasn't all bad.

JE: What year was that when you met Maureen?

SP: 1972, in the summer of '72.

JE: And then when were you married?

SP: We were married in the spring of '73.

JE: How many children did you have?

SP: We have three.

JE: And they are?

SP: Allison, Whitney, and Bobby.

JE: Are they involved in business at all?

SP: They're not involved in the business. They all are doing well.

JE: Did they work in the store?

SP: Yes, they all three did at one point or another. They did things. My son delivered groceries. Allison was a cashier for a while, and Whitney worked in our office.

JE: When you said working in it, did you enjoy it, or did you feel you had to, or did you catch that grocery store spirit?

SP: When I was a youngster, I didn't catch the spirit, and I did think I had to. I was joking with my brother the other day, who I might add was also in our business for about 15 years with me. I was joking with him about on Saturday when I was in high school, I looked forward – like any kid to

Saturdays.

I mean, you know, that was a day off. My dad would call me like, eight in the morning, "you need to get over here. So-and-so didn't show up for work." Well, that was in the days before email and cell phone and all that. So I learned very quickly, don't sleep in. Get out of the house as fast as you can.

So he couldn't track me down and call me into work. So some of it I did because I thought I had to do as a member of the family. And people used to say to me all the time, "Someday you're going to be running this store." And I'd say, "no, I'm not either. I'm going to do something. I'm going to do this and that and such and such." But it did end up that way.

JE: When does it begin to sink in that, no, this is a business I could manage and I like it?

SP: Well, I was going to go to law school when I came back home from the military. And my dad talked me into coming with him in this venture. And he said, "Just do it for six months. It'll help me get organized. And then if you want to do something else, go ahead". And I thought, well, you know," that's reasonable. That's fair." So like a lot of stories go, you know, I started. And I began to see the challenge of it. And I was busy. And I was beginning to see the fruits of my labor. And I stayed with it.

JE: He probably was hoping that was going to happen.

SP: Well, I'm sure he was.

JE: When does the store move into Utica Square?

SP: That was in 1972. It was about a month or two before I came home and joined him in the business. That was one of the reasons he wanted me to come back.

JE: Do you know what led up to moving into the square?

SP: Well, yes, we purchased Wolferman's. They were a tenant there in Utica Square at that time. We were in the same building as Miss Jackson's, another longtime Tulsa company. And I knew the Fisher family, of course, that owned Miss Jackson's.

JE: That's how you got that location, the location we all know.

SP: Yes, that's right.

JE: Which is part of the whole structure there of Miss Jackson's. It's all one big building.

SP: Right, one big building.

JE: Do you remember people who would come in, celebrities maybe? You were by the hospital. There was a lot of draw from there that would bring people in. Do you remember any major names or any celebrities?

SP: I would say we had quite a few governors who shopped with us. Frank Keating, David Boren, Dewey Bartlett Sr., Oral Roberts, many famous people. Actors and actresses would come into town, and they would tend to come to the store and buy things.

JE: Any names stand out?

SP: Well, one stands out, and I won't make any comment other than that, and that's Jane Fonda. So given the rest of the interview, you can understand that.

JE: To the listeners, Jane Fonda, of course, was very much against the Vietnam War, campaigned against it.

SP: Her picture was on the cover of Life magazine, sitting at the controls of a 37-millimeter Russian anti-aircraft gun, the very guns that were shooting down me and my friends. And so I found out later that she had come in the stores. I got some of her money anyway.

JE: Oh, and you weren't there.

SP: I wasn't there at the time.

JE: Did you think if I had been there, I would have said something to her?

SP: I probably would not have, but anyway.

JE: That is interesting that she would have been in there.

Chapter 07 – 9:05
Specialty Foods

John Erling (JE): Do you remember some things that were back in the 70s, hot selling items in the grocery store that maybe faded away, or fads?

Scott Petty (SP): One of the things I remember that actually didn't fade away, but it was a specialty item that became a mainstream item. And that was Perrier water. Back in the 60s, I remember people would pay a great deal of money for bottled water.

And I always thought that was a little crazy, you know, because we had Spavinaw water coming out of the tap. It was wonderful. Right. And I thought, "what are you paying this money for this water?" But we were selling it, so, you know, I'm in business to sell product. Still, it hadn't really taken off.

So Perrier water hit the market, and it was a carbonated water, and bottled in France. And we were doing very well with that water. Gradually, it got to the point where today, you can walk in a quick trip and buy Perrier. It's everywhere. That was one scenario.

To go back to what you asked me about something being a flash in the pan, there were many things like that. For so many years, in the 50s and 60s, we just had a set amount of products. You had certain kinds of Nabisco crackers and certain coffees and a few cereals, just for years and years and years. And then all of a sudden, you had this explosion of new products.

All these companies trying to get an edge on the other one. That made it very difficult. And some of these products, through advertising and through promotion and through couponing, would take off, and then they'd fizzle out. And it made it hard on the retailers. We were constantly having to shift gears.

JE: You know, your clientele for where it was there, 21st and Utica Square, was a very wealthy clientele. Is that fair?

SP: Yes, that's fair. I think especially in the earlier years, that was more true than today.

JE: Really? In 2016? So that's changed not necessarily the wealth there that used to be? Is that true?

SP: I think that the market changed. And in Tulsa, Oklahoma today, you have a better educated, more diverse consumer base of food products. You know, we had school teachers shop with us, and they liked the products. So they weren't the wealthiest people in town, but they liked the products. And so our customer mix changed a little bit. But yes, in the old days, we were more of what they call a carriage trade operation.

JE: When you talk about Perrier, were you like maybe one of the first stores to have Perrier?

SP: I think we probably were the first one.

JE: Okay, and so that's what made it so special.

SP: There were many products like that. We'd be the first one. Then all of a sudden, maybe not all of a sudden, but gradually, they would penetrate the market, and everyone would end up with it.

JE: But you got the first blush on it.

SP: And then we'd move on to another specialty product.

JE: You had a distributor, I suppose, or somebody who said, this is hot stuff.

SP: Right. That's right. We had distributors, some on the East Coast, that we were buying from. And they would obviously educate us and say, "This is something hot. You guys need this." And then we'd go to food shows and see product and buy it.

JE: Today, we have specialty stores. We're going to talk about Whole Foods. We have Trader Joe's that's now in town. All these stores. You were the first specialty store in town.

SP: You know, you're right, John, and we've talked about that a lot. And thinking back about the history of our company, we didn't know how good we had it. Like back in the 70s and the 80s, we were the only game in town for specialty foods. Gradually, that began to change. And now, I mean, the

competition is just staggering. And you mentioned a couple of the major players there. Both national companies. And they're very tough to compete with.

JE: Now, Reasor's, the biggest locally owned chain, I suppose, coming out of Tahlequah. I'm not sure when they came on the Tulsa scene, they were always in the rural markets.

SP: Yes.

JE: And I don't know if you have a sense of when they came in, but now they are very much part of this town. But that was a different competition for you, wasn't it? I mean, they weren't a specialty store.

SP: They are not a specialty store, but they're an excellent operation, and they were tough competitors, too. A very good meat program. Jeff and his people have really taken that company to a new level. And they're a major player now in Tulsa.

JE: His father would be proud, Larry. We used to see him up at his store at Langley. Larry, and then he'd be on television. Remember those commercials on television?

SP: Oh, I remember the commercials. Playing. Everybody thought they were horrible commercials, but they worked.

JE: They did. Everybody. He played the trombone, I think, maybe, and they had some other instruments there. And so research, and I don't know what other chain stores we have, because some of them, Albertsons and all, they're all gone. Many of them.

SP: Most all of them are gone. Of course, Walmart is the major player today in the grocery business, with the super stores, the neighborhood markets. But you still have Warehouse Market, and they're an interesting operation and they've been successful over the years and they're niche.

JE: Let's name some of your employees that had worked for you for a long time, and how long did they work there?

SP: We have been blessed, John, over the years to have some wonderful people work for us. And that really is the reason for the longevity and the success of our company. And I think of men like Herschel Whitworth,

longtime manager. He came back and started working for my grandfather. At the end of World War II, he had been in the Navy, just a kid.

He ended up working with us into the 90s. Jim Legere, one of our store managers who had been with us a long time. Howard Gillihan ran our meat department. He had been trained by my grandfather as a meat cutter, great meat cutter, very good with the customers. We had a longtime cashier, Ella Mae Morris. If we had added up the dollars that she had checked through her cash register, it would be staggering.

Customers liked her because she knew everybody's name and was a loyal employee to the company. Another guy, Harold Eddington, who's retired, he lives in a small home over near Tulsa Country Club. He was the quintessential courtesy clerk. And we were talking about him the other day. He was a very polite, courtly gentleman. Carried out groceries. And we kept trying to promote him. And he wouldn't take promotions. And I finally figured out why.

He was making so much money in tips out on the parking lot. And he told me one day, he said, "I appreciate it, Mr. Petty, but I just can't afford to take the promotion." I said, well, "okay, stay where you are." And I can remember, I'd be driving up to the store, like coming back from lunch or something, and I would see him walking across the lot, and he'd be sticking a green bill into his pocket. Almost every single time.

JE: Yeah, a likable personality.

SP: Yeah, and he was great. Customers loved him.

JE: So you would say, without those people as backbone, we would have had a really tough time.

SP: Absolutely. I mean, that was the key to our company, is getting good people. And that's tough to do.

JE: It's interesting about a grocery store, because it's a meeting place. We see our neighbors, and if it weren't for a grocery store, you may not see their friends. It's often the only time we just bump into them. And you have conversations. Some people could look at a grocery store. I remember, I met so-and-so in a certain aisle at Petty's or some other grocery store. It

really is that meeting place. And when that meeting place is closed, there's a whole gap in the lives of people.

SP: Well, you're right. And I think with our store, that was even more true than maybe some of the supermarkets. Many of my customers knew each other, and they'd carry on long conversations on the produce aisle or whatever, about what their kids were doing or the latest trip they'd taken or whatever. That was a big part of our business.

JE: Yeah. Might have been some marriages started there in your store. Somebody bumped into somebody, and they became married.

SP: Yes. In fact, I used to have employees say to me, young men who would come to work there, the women who shop here are so beautiful. So, yeah, that probably happened.

Chapter 08 – 12:17

Ups and Downs of Business

John Erling (JE): So, Maureen started the catering business.

Scott Petty (SP): Yes.

JE: And when was that?

SP: That was in the early 90s. It was kind of interesting. A friend called me and he said, “My daughter's getting married this weekend and our caterer canceled out on us. Do you think Maureen could pull this off?” Well, she was known as a lady who knew how to host a party, but she'd never really catered anything. And always looking for a way to increase volume or make a customer happy.

“Yeah, don't worry, we'll handle it.” And I came home and told her and she exploded at me and said, “what are you thinking? What are you doing?” I said, “look, I'll work it with you. I'll help you.” We did the event and it turned out really well. After it was all over, she said, “you know what? I think I might be able to do this.” And I said, “okay, let's go forward.” She gradually just built the business.

We never really promoted it or advertised it. She had a lot of corporate customers, grand openings, Christmas parties, those types of things. Did a lot of weddings in the hotels, like the Mayo, for instance. She'd done quite a few weddings there before they got their own food service and catering. It was a great thing to add to our business.

JE: And the image of the store, if they thought it was a cut above, helped in that regard.

SP: Yeah. You're right, it did. That was beneficial to us also.

JE: Because we want to do a really nice party. Well, who would do that but a nice store like Petty's Fine Foods?

SP: Right. And it was kind of funny. We laugh about this now, but I told Maureen, I said, "my concept of the catering or the deli is if you have apples that are starting to turn or something, we make a bunch of apple pie." And she was just the opposite. She would go in and handpick everything.

So the manager would say, "Maureen came in here and she took all my good stuff," you know, and that's how she did it. So we argued about that in the beginning, but I began to realize, hey, this is working out and people respected it. She was very successful in that business.

JE: And that catering continued to 2016.

SP: Yeah. In fact, she had a tremendous Christmas season this past season, holiday season.

JE: When did you become the manager of the store?

SP: My father retired in 1985. I believe it was March of 1985. So it was right about that time that I actually was running everything. But prior to his retirement, my brother was involved with me at that time. We were running it pretty much for maybe five years prior to him retiring.

JE: But it was in '85 then you officially became the manager of the store?

SP: Yes. And owner.

JE: And owner, right. Yeah. Were there times, '85 to 2016 or whenever the business was slack, was off, we need to do something or can we even last?

SP: Oh, there were many times. And the time that stands out in my mind was in the mid-90s. Albertsons had just opened at 15th and Lewis and it really hurt our business. We had done well in the early 90s. And interestingly enough, we got all that business back plus some from Albertsons before it was over. But at the time, when they first opened, they opened in Wild Oats at 41st and Peoria, where Whole Foods is now, opened on the same weekend.

So it was really tough and they hurt our business. I was bleeding off cash and I went to Hale Halsall, whom we were not supplied by at that time, and said, "Would you be interested in being an equity partner?" And Bob Hawk was the head guy. I had Hale Halsall in those days. And he said, "Scott, we'll do it. We respect your company and we'd like to be partners with you, but we have to own 51%."

So in my lease at that time with Helmerich and Payne, the owners of Utica Square, if the ownership of my company changed in terms of control of the company, it had to be approved. And I did all my negotiation of leases with Mr. Helmerich himself. So I called Helmerich and I said, "Mr. Helmerich, this is the deal." He said, "are you sure you want to do this?" And I said, "I have to do it. I need to do it." He said, "well, you come up here with Bob Hawk. I want to talk to you."

So we made the pilgrimage up to his office. He sat down and he really grilled Hawk. And Hawk wasn't the kind of guy that liked to be grilled. But being grilled by somebody like me is one thing. But if you're grilled by Walt Helmerich, you accept it. I remember to this day, I'll never forget this. Walt looked at Hawk and he said, "I want you to own 49%. And I want Scott to own 49%. And I'll own 2%."

Well, if you think about that, a guy that owns 2%, he could kind of throw his support either way, depending on what he wanted to do. It was a very shrewd proposal on his part. But Hawk looked at him and he said, "no, 51%. That's it." So thankfully, Mr. Helmerich agreed to it. We went forward from there. Eventually, Hale-Hausel went bankrupt. And right before they did,

we spun our company out of it. And Maureen and I ended up with 100% again.

JE: Wow.

SP: It ended up working out for us because we bought it back for a lot less than we sold it for. Our share of it. That worked out. But yeah, that was a tough time.

JE: That's sleepless nights time.

SP: Yeah, you're right. And I mean, I remember thinking, well, this may be it. You know, I may be looking for a new career.

JE: Well, you give Walt Helmerich, who we've interviewed, of course, and is one of the inspirations for this very website, credit for grilling him. But it didn't really work out the way Walt wanted. He lost on that deal, apparently.

SP: Well, he didn't lose any money. His proposal was not accepted.

JE: Right, right.

SP: But he got... He got some things into the lease that protected me. And I always appreciated that. He was a supporter of ours. And he wasn't one of the kind of guys that passed out compliments all the time. But he stopped me in Utica Square and he said, "Scott, I just wish the other tenants around here operated like you did." And I said, "well, what do you mean by that, Mr. Helmerich?"

And he said, "you're open seven days a week, long hours, and you promote like crazy." Of course, as a landlord, that's what he wanted.

JE: Right. And then he was supporting you, local family. He wanted that to be local, local, local. And he was...

SP: That meant a lot to him. He wanted to have a certain mix of tenants in there that would serve the neighborhood. And a grocery store was important to him to have there.

JE: Yes. I'm sure it would have pained him to know that you have closed to this day. He would not have appreciated that very much because he wanted local, local. He was known for bringing... Small, independent businesses that he spotted in the community into Utica Square.

SP: I remember he tried to bring in Relay, the Vietnamese restaurant operator. Relay, I think, decided that he couldn't pay the rent. But that was an example of a business locally that would have been a great fit there. Walt tried to recruit him, but he did recruit a lot of people.

JE: Yeah. Queenie's is one of those that we recruited. We could probably name some others. But at any rate... You made it through that by the hair on your chinny-chin-chin, as we say.

SP: Exactly.

JE: And then life got good again.

SP: Yes, it did. And in fact, I began to realize that we were underpricing our product. Albertsons, when they put the store in, they were higher than we were on everything. Yet they were taking this business away from us. And I thought, well, heck, I'm not going to stand for that. So we came up on our prices.

Ted Robertson, that owns Robertson Tire, loves for me to tell this story. We came up on our prices to meet them. And as a result, we got more gross profit, better margin, and we began to get business back from them. I know that sounds strange, but that's exactly what happened.

JE: And you mentioned Wild Oats. They're no longer here. Albertsons is gone. And so these two competitors that you thought, oh, no, this is our demise. Are not there.

SP: That's true. And, you know, two of our other big competitors are gone, McCartney's and Sipes. And they were good operations in their day.

JE: Yes. You had a sushi bar, didn't you?

SP: Yes, we did.

JE: Tell us about that. When did that come in?

SP: We put that in in the 90s. I think it was the late 90s. I was at a food show and we met someone who did these sushi bars. It was actually a company in South Carolina. They had a team of Burmese chefs that did this. We were talking about it and I had a little bit of a concern about it because I don't know anything about sushi, really. I mean, as far as making it.

They assured me, “hey, we have the chefs trained, we have the menu, and these people are hard workers,” which they are, and they'll come in and they'll do the whole thing. So I said, “okay, we'll give it a try”. And it worked out. They made it fresh every day in the store. And I had many customers say, “this sushi is as good as sushi. This is as good as sushi as we can get at the nicer sushi restaurants in town.” Great stuff.

JE: The Tulsa World gave you a lot of free media. They wrote about you many, many stories. And maybe this will bring some memories to you. They were writing about fun, funky, chunky treats, chocolate-covered popcorn and pretzels, along with tins of Wilkin and Sons, tip tree Christmas pudding are there to greet you when you first enter the iconic specialty grocery store.

SP: We had a good relationship with the Tulsa World. And of course, in those days, the Lorton family owned the newspaper, and they were good customers of ours. We were customers of theirs. You know, we did a lot of advertising. But they did. They treated us well over the years.

JE: Then just down the aisle, past the perfect rows of shiny fruits and vegetables, come the Assumption Abbey fruitcakes. No kidding. Fruitcakes, they wrote.

SP: Well, I think the reason they wrote that was because fruitcakes became out of fashion, more or less. And I remember people used to come in the store and tell me, “just don't give me another one of those fruitcakes for Christmas, whatever you do.” But the fruitcakes that were made at the Assumption Abbey, which is in Missouri somewhere, were really, really good. And they had that mystique behind them. You know, they were made by the monks at the Abbey. They were a cut above. So they did sell.

JE: Was that your major form of advertising? Was it newspaper?

SP: Yes, it was. Over the years, we did quite a bit of radio. We were on your station, of course. You probably heard our commercials.

JE: KRMG.

SP: KRMG for many years. That was a great Tulsa station. Yep. That's where our audience was, on radio. We liked radio because it was a little more targeted. You know, television is kind of the shotgun blast approach of

advertising.

You hit a lot of people, but you hit a lot of people that you don't need to hit. You know, somebody living in the rural areas outside Tulsa or something, we're not going to get them as a customer more than likely. So the radio was more targeted and a better value for us, we thought. And KRMG was a huge player in that for us.

Chapter 09 – 11:25

Best Petty's Years

John Erling (JE): As you look back, what would be the best time, you think, of the store, the money you enjoyed? Was it the 70s? The 80s? The 90s? The beginning of the 2000s? Was there a time?

Scott Petty (SP): Yes, I would say from about 2004 to about 2011. Maybe in there. Those were some of our best years financially. And then toward the end, when all the competitors started opening again, it started turning back around on us. But those seven years were really good for us. I was very conservative about leaving money inside the company, and that helped us get through these tough periods until the end of our lease.

JE: But you said some of your competitors, then it started coming back around again?

SP: Well, more of them started moving in toward the end, right before we closed.

JE: And that affected your business?

SP: Yes. It had a negative effect on us.

JE: Talk about if you remember some of the prices. From the 50s, 60s, 70s, and today. Do you remember vegetables, apples, or whatever you could say? Well they were priced such-and-such in the 60s and today they're such-and-such?

SP: That's hard for me to remember. I remember, though, that just in general terms, we had a lot of prices like 39 cents, 49 cents. This is back in the 60s. You know, on products.

JE: Right.

SP: You can't buy anything for that.

JE: You can't buy a candy bar for that.

SP: No. Well, in fact, a candy bar is like \$1.19.

JE: Yeah.

SP: And, John, they've shrunk in size.

JE: Right.

SP: You've noticed that. Right. So the prices have gone up dramatically. It seems to me I remember that you could buy a package of cigarettes for 30 cents. And we got out of that business, by the way, and I was proud of the fact we did.

JE: When did you do that?

SP: We got out around 2000. These tobacco companies were trying to call all the shots by coming in and saying, we'll pay you so much money, but we want this space, and we want to do this, and you have to do this promotion. I didn't like the idea. I don't think cigarettes are a good thing. So I didn't like it anyway. And when they started doing all that, I thought, you know what? I'm going to quit this. We were the first grocery store in Tulsa to discontinue tobacco.

JE: What percentage of your business do you think was tobacco?

SP: It was very small. I have to be honest with you. At that point, it was small. We had issues where minors were trying to purchase the cigarettes and those types of things. And I just thought, it's not worth it. So we got out of it.

But I do remember, you know, like 30 cents, and I don't even know what a carton is today, but I think it's around \$55 or \$60 a carton for 10 packs.

JE: Wow.

SP: So cigarettes would be, what, \$5 a pack at least, name brand. And back then in the old days, it was 30 cents. So I remember that. And bacon was really cheap. Eggs were like 39 cents a dozen.

JE: What about eggs today?

SP: Well, there are so many different kinds of eggs today, as you know, but probably the cheapest eggs you can get for around a dollar, I imagine.

JE: You saw a lot of changes in the way products were produced. There's free range chickens. There's all these categories for eggs and for the chicken itself that you saw come in over time.

SP: Well, that's true. And that became an issue. And I remember that we went through a period of time, for instance, with veal. The public was concerned that these animals were being treated properly before they were killed. And I know that sounds kind of funny, but they were.

So it was a matter of, how are these animals being treated? Are they being treated humanely? Are they being fed properly? And there are some unpleasantries involved in there that I won't get into. But that always seemed a bit strange to me because, I mean, in the end, the animals were going to be killed anyway. But that was a factor.

And then with the free range chickens, of course, the idea there was, and there's some validity to it, that the chickens were healthier if they were allowed to roam around and forage their own grain. You know, of course, that's more expensive if you're raising chickens to do that. But people will pay that higher price for that understanding. And then fish, for instance, that became a big deal.

You know, wild-caught versus farm-raised. I was a big believer in that because the wild-caught fish, to me, did taste better and seemed better. But today, that's a big thing. You walk into a fish market, people want to know, are these farm-raised salmon or are they wild-caught salmon?

JE: And you never heard vegetables being organically grown in the 60s and 70s.

SP: No one ever even talked about that. They were just carrots that came out of the ground.

JE: And they came right out of the ground, right.

SP: But that became a huge thing. And there again, there's some validity there to those concerns. I think.

JE: That would have affected prices, too.

SP: Yes, absolutely. And I remember when the organics first came on the market, they did not look good. I could bring in organic apples and put them beside extra fancy Washington apples grown in orchards the conventional way. And those apples looked beautiful. Then I'd bring in the organic apples. They looked terrible. And they were higher priced.

And I thought, how's this going to work? In the beginning, it didn't work. It didn't work very well. And then gradually, the organics became more competitive on price. They began to look better. And of course, that really made them take off.

JE: What sort of items would be put out on impulse buying that worked for you every time?

SP: I would say seasonal items. If you could get the right seasonal items and put those out, people would impulsively buy those. Like, I don't think anyone plans to make a St. Patrick's Day purchase. I mean, with some exceptions. And I married a good Irish girl, so we got a kick out of promoting St. Patrick's Day. You could do wonderful things in the bakery and shamrock plants and that kind of thing. And those were really impulse items.

Same thing at Valentine's Day, which we saw growth in that holiday. Halloween. And I'm not just talking about Halloween. But Halloween party favors and food items. Decorated sugar cookies with black and orange and all that. Goblins and the whole bit. Those are all impulse type items. Putting them out at the right time is the key. If you get them out at the right time, you might sell a ton of them. You get them out there too late or at the wrong time, you'll eat them.

JE: Then there's a placement on the shelf, too, isn't there? That's very important.

SP: Yeah.

JE: Talk to us about the upper shelf, the lower shelf, and the middle shelf.

SP: That's a debatable thing. You'll get arguments from people one way or the other. What's the most favorable position on this shelf? And a lot depends on the product, the location in the store overall. But for the most part, eye level is considered the top spot.

And then you had what we call first position. So the bread companies were famous for paying retailers. And they used to pay us in the old days. We'll pay you so much money if we can be in first position. So in their mind, first position was the traditional shopping pattern would let you arrive at this position in the bread section first. And that's where they all wanted to be. They had their idea of what their traffic pattern was in the store, which wasn't too hard to figure out.

So in their mind, this is first position. We want to be here. So vertically, I'm saying all up and down. For the first four feet, that would be first position. And that's what they wanted. And some of them would pay for it. But for the most part, we always stuck to the idea that eye level merchandise, our fancier products, our higher margin products, we wanted at eye level.

If you wanted to buy Campbell's tomato soup, for instance, which came in a 48-pack case, that was down on the bottom. You'd bend down for that. But for my expensive bookbinder soup, that needed to be at eye level.

JE: Was it fun for you to place something in the store at a certain aisle or whatever to see if it would be picked up? Hobby Lobby and David Green – I've interviewed him and when he was a high schooler, he enjoyed as he worked for TG&Y, he could go in and just place things in certain areas as experiments just to see if people would buy it just because it was in that position. You must've done some of that.

SP: We did, and it was amazing how that makes a difference. It never ceased to amaze me. We would have a product that we felt was in the right spot, and then we would re-merchandise the store. Maybe we'd move the

vegetables over one aisle or something. And all of a sudden, all these customers would say, "I didn't know you had this. When did you get that?" "Oh, we've had that for years." Well, I never saw it. Yeah. It's just amazing. So it is a huge factor.

JE: Everybody has their routine, don't they? And you were trying to break some of that routine a little bit. I suppose also if you moved something, they'd complain.

SP: Yes, they would. In fact, more often, we got the complaint. Why did you move it? I got used to it being here.

JE: Music in the store, that wasn't always. There was a point that that became popular in grocery stores, and I suppose in your store as well. And what did that contribute to even sales?

SP: That's very difficult to say. For years, we were a customer of Muzak, and that was what they used to call the elevator music. You had an antenna on top of the store and a receiver and an amplifier inside the store, and you'd broadcast that music in the store. And they gave you like five or six choices of the type of music you wanted.

I'm kind of a conservative guy, so I always put the old stuff in. But anyway, I think it puts people in a better frame of mind, maybe. If you walk in a store and you don't hear anything, it's sort of eerily silent sometimes, especially when it's not busy. I remember one time, John, and you'd appreciate this in your career. We got on the wrong side of the musicians' union one time because I got the bright idea we were going to rebroadcast FM radio and quit paying for music.

Somebody walked in the store and heard a commercial on one of the FM stations and realized, we were doing that, and they called us to a task on that. And of course, you legally aren't supposed to do that. So we went back to Muzak.

Chapter 10 – 10:20
Store Closing

John Erling (JE): I get this out of the Tulsa World years ago: Michael Gubser's take home comfort food became a part of your store.

Scott Petty (SP): Yes.

JE: And tell us about that.

SP: Well, I'd known Michael for a long time. His mother was an outstanding cook and chef. I think she wrote several cookbooks. But Michael prepared kind of the old-fashioned comfort food. One day, I took him out to lunch, and I said, "Why don't you come to work for us, and we'll work something out?" So he was with us for, I can't remember how long. I'm going to say about 10 years.

He did these meals for us, and we called him Gourmet Express. It was kind of funny. When I first started working with him, he would say, "Okay, here's my product, and the name of it is Chili." I'd say, "Michael, that's too plain." And he'd say, "Well, it's just Chili. How do you jazz that up?" So I told him, I said, "We're going to call it Chuck Wagon Chili because we're using ground chuck in it."

And I wanted people to know that we were using ground chuck instead of ground beef. It was kind of funny, but he was really good at preparing the product. And then we ended up, when he retired, we took that over ourselves and kept on going with it.

JE: Was that frozen dinners, then?

SP: Oh, no, it was fresh.

JE: Did you have a TV dinner? Did he do a TV dinner?

SP: He didn't. You know, back in the old days, I mean, you're talking like the 50s and 60s in my mind when you say TV dinner. I remember. I remember those.

JE: Swanson.

SP: Exactly. Those never sold very well for us.

JE: And we should say the Swanson family owned KRMG for many, many years.

SP: Well, that's right. And I knew Gary Swanson. He was quite a guy.

JE: Probably a customer of yours, as a matter of fact.

SP: He was, and a friend. His wife, a customer, too.

JE: Yeah. We're talking here on April 4th, 2016. What day did the store close for good?

SP: We checked out our last customer January 31st, 2016.

JE: How tough was that when you closed the door that night?

SP: It was tough. During the liquidation, you know, of course, like anybody going out of business, we had a big sale and all this. We were so busy doing all that and talking to customers and answering questions. I didn't have time to think about it as much. But yeah, when that last day rolled around and you began to see, all the vacant space in the store, which I would never have stood for, of course, as an operator, it got to me. But nothing lasts forever.

JE: And your employees that were with you on that day.

SP: Yes, that was a sad thing. And I'll tell you this. I met with our employees and I told them what was happening. Not one employee jumped ship and left early.

JE: Because you told them how far out. How far out did you tell them?

SP: About a month. And they stayed with us until the end. And I was so flattered and grateful to them for that.

JE: Boy, that's loyalty.

SP: It was amazing.

JE: Yeah, that's great. So then for the sake of history, the store is closed because you weren't able to renew your contract with Utica Square and Helmrich & Payne. Tell us why that happened.

SP: Well, I'm not at liberty to tell the whole story, but I think they have alternative plans for that building.

JE: Well, it certainly started when Miss Jackson's was announced that it was closing. But were you always on the same tier of that? We knew Miss Jackson's was going, but we didn't know for sure about you.

SP: Well, that's right. The Miss Jackson's decision was made earlier. And of course, we should say to those listening that Helmrich & Payne owned Miss Jackson's at the end.

JE: Right.

SP: They bought it from the Fisher family. So they had complete control of that building and that space. That decision was made a little earlier. And then we finally mutually agreed that we would close.

JE: We should say, Walt Helmrich, it was very important for him to keep the ownership of Miss Jackson's local. And he was afraid that some big conglomeration was going to come in and buy it. And to my visiting with him, that was his decision to buy that just to keep it the way it was.

SP: Yes, that's pretty much it. There's another factor there, too, that he felt Miss Jackson's was a good tenant and brought people into Utica Square. And he felt like it would be very detrimental for them to close. That was part of it. And then the other part was what you said.

JE: So when you write the words, Today is the final day of our sale. We will close our doors permanently at 6 p.m. Thank you, Tulsa. For 71 wonderful years. Our loyal customers and dedicated employees have made our company what it is today. We are honored to have been associated with you and your families for so many special occasions and memories. And those were your closing words to the closing of the store.

SP: Yes, and I sat in front of my computer and composed that myself. So it was very heartfelt. And that was the final message.

JE: Yeah. Was there some part of you that, since business was tough, that you thought, you know what, maybe this is okay? If you hadn't been told to close, would it just gone on forever and ever? Or was there a time in your mind, I wonder if we can make it?

SP: Yes. I used to think that all the time, John.

JE: Right.

SP: Definitely that was part of it. My age was part of it. You know, I'm 68 years old, which I don't feel old, but it's a young man's business. It's very physical. You know, Maureen, her carrying on that catering business, that would have been so demanding on her. And we had come to rely upon that as a major part of our business, at least an important part of our business.

All those factors came into play. So I'm not unhappy with where we are. I just look back over the years, and I'm so grateful to all the people, the customers, the employees, the vendors, friends. I mean, it's just been. It's been an amazing career.

JE: And gave you a good lifestyle as well.

SP: Yes.

JE: I know the media has been asking you questions about what happens to Scott and family and company from here on in. On this date, do you know if you will open elsewhere? Do you have the energy for it? Do you have any plans? You're 68, but you're very young.

SP: Well, you know, I have a vision. I have a passion for such a thing. As I joked the other day. I've been besieged by offers from people, but it's all with my money and no one else's money. So until someone actually writes the check, then I'm not sure if we're going to go forward. We don't have any plans to do anything right now. But it is a possibility.

JE: Because as our downtown has become more and more vibrant and people are actually living downtown, which they hadn't been in the 80s, 90s. Here we are in 2016. Maybe there's core for a grocery store there because there isn't one downtown.

SP: Well, I think there is. It's a question of timing and location and the size of the store. And most all the activity that I mentioned a minute ago about people making offers and proposals to us. That's been around downtown.

JE: Okay.

SP: So something's going to happen there soon.

JE: If it's not you, it's going to be somebody else.

SP: That's what I mean. Yeah.

JE: And you don't feel energized enough to say. Boy, we have to be downtown. We have to be there. We have to open another store.

SP: If we did it, I think that would be where I would love to do it. Because, you know, I'm a native Tulsan. I remember shopping downtown with my mom at Seidenbach's and Vandiver's and Rindberg's and all these places. I would love to be in downtown. But we don't have any plans to do anything right now.

JE: As you look back, what do you think? It's been fun. It's been good. What would you? To this point, you have another 68 years to live. So, you know, as you look back and what it's given to you, your military record was just so honorable. And now this great grocery store has come to an end. But you look back, what are some of your words that you would describe all that?

SP: I just feel so blessed to have had the opportunity to do what I've done. It's been a wonderful career. And the one thing I've never been able to do, because I've been so busy all the time, is just enjoy some of the simple things of life.

So many of my employees said to me, for the first time in my life, I'm going to enjoy Christmas. And I know what they mean by that. You know, I would just stagger into Midnight Mass, you know, exhausted on Christmas Eve. That's one goal is to spend more time with my family and grandchildren and hobbies and projects. So I'm really looking forward to that but I'm still not ruling out a return.

JE: Yeah.

SP: Kinda like a heavyweight fighter, I guess. You know, you retire but they make you come back.

JE: Because you feel you have the energy for it.

SP: I think I do have the energy for it.

JE: Well, Petty's has always had a wonderful image and reputation in this town. It has never, ever changed. One thing I've always heard about Scott Petty, everybody says, "oh, he's a really nice guy."

SP: Well I hope that came from your lovely wife, Margaret. She was a classmate of mine.

JE: But beyond that, people of the community have said that about you.

SP: Well, thank you.

JE: People enjoyed shopping for your products, but also for your personality and the strength, the personality of your people as well. Thanks for sharing this. There's going to be a lot of people who will enjoy hearing the story of Petty's Fine Foods.

SP: Thank you, John.

JE: You're welcome.

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